

HOW TO BE A SAVVY BOARD MEMBER

Today's volunteer leaders want to be more than figureheads -- they want to take an active role in moving the association forward. But to do this, they have to understand their responsibilities, look toward the future, and always put the association first.

Volunteer leaders want more than the trappings of power. They want to influence the future course of their association by making a meaningful contribution. To do so, however, requires considerable know-how.

Leadership asked three association executives to share their insights on the role of the board and what it takes to serve with excellence. Their articles, which discuss many important leadership principles, will help you make the most of your term in office.

1. How to be a Savvy Board Member - by Frederick T. Spahr, CAE

What makes a "good" board member? When I first considered this question, I thought about our own executive board at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), Rockville, Maryland, and the many outstanding members I have known over the years.

Then I reflected on my own volunteer service as a board member of the Greater Washington Society of Association Executive, Washington, DC, my parish council, a national committee that promotes funding for research into neurological disorders, and other groups.

Two factors emerged clearly from this dual perspective. A good board member is a team player who can contribute to the mission of the organization without needing to be a star. He or she is also a futuristic thinker.

Attitude is more important than background, expertise, organizational acumen, educational attainment or anything else. The attitudes that lead to success as a volunteer board member are based on an awareness of the importance of co-operation and the need to set goals for the organization.

At ASHA, we have a somewhat unusual structure for a non-profit professional membership association. Our 500,000-member organization has both an elected executive board, chosen annually by a national vote, and a legislative council of 150 members elected in each state and the District of Columbia based on the number of members in each jurisdiction. The 10-member board acts as the management body, and the council makes policy decisions.

Most members have master's degrees and are involved in the profession of speech-language pathology and audiology or speech or hearing sciences. Possessing considerable education and training and an innate sensitivity to the mechanisms of human interaction, our members are ideally suited for the complex group of dynamics that characterize a volunteer board. Some

stand out in my mind as consistently effective at the highest levels. I'd like to profile two of these leaders.

Quality Service

One former board member is a person widely admired in our profession who has never used professional stature as a rationale for dominating or controlling. As a board member and president, this individual spoke when there was something relevant to say and unified opposing sides of an issue through use of considerable negotiating skills.

This person helped other board members stick to the issue at hand and did not personalize debate. An outstanding ability to work comfortably within a conflict rather than feel intimidated or angered by it helped other board members reach solutions.

Knowing the value of co-operation on all issues is characteristic of the second board member. By all issues, I mean not only those of personal interest to this member but also of interest to colleagues in the field and related fields.

This member has had wide experience in all levels of governance in our association and many others related to our profession. Consequently, this member's board service was distinguished by wisdom stemming from depth of experience and an ability to take the long view in planning future directions.

ASHA's members possess expertise in a wide range of specialities, such as child language, aphasia, brain-injured patients, articulation, stuttering, hearing aid dispensing, and aural rehabilitation. They practice the profession in a wide range of settings, including schools, hospitals, rehabilitation agencies, private practices, universities, and research laboratories.

Seeing The Big Picture

Members who are elected to our volunteer board may be perceived by those who vote for them as representing one segment or another of the profession, one setting, one geographical area, or some other fragment of the whole. Once on the board, however, the strongest and most effective members recognize that their constituency is the entire membership.

Occasionally, a member joins the board with a personal agenda of over-riding importance, a cause that obscures all other issues in the member's mind. But the strongest members quickly understand that the association's agenda and the board's agenda have to be paramount. As executive director, I rely on that understanding to help me in my managerial task.

Of major importance to me as executive director is the role of the board in setting future directions for the association. We have recently completed our second long-range plan for the years 1988-1990. It is an outstanding document developed by our long-range plan committee under guidance of the board.

Planning For Tomorrow

I rely on the board to establish directions and priorities for the future. Our board members are on the line, day in and day out, working with clients, developing new talent for our profession, functioning within a changing health-care delivery system, and dealing with the daily frustrations and joys of the practice of a healthy and education-related profession.

They - not I - know intimately what their colleagues need to progress and prosper. They bring this knowledge to their role as board members. I learn from them.

To function as futuristic thinkers, board members must be open to their colleagues, interested in learning all they can, as objective as possible, and terrific communicators who can share information and gain the support of others.

Above all, however, board members must be able to think about the future and understand the successes and failures of the past and the aspirations of our colleagues. It can hamper a board member's effectiveness to dwell on minutiae and lose sight of the bigger picture.

What of so-called politics? The "political" board member generally has a negative overall image as a wheeler-dealer who causes more harm than good. But that may not always be true.

An effective board member needs to understand the politics of the organization and of the board itself, including how to obtain support from other board members and how and when to give support.

I have seen cases in which laudatory projects and ideas were defeated or died because their sponsors were not politically astute enough to gain support from their colleagues. In some sad cases, defeat came because colleagues had become too alienated to work together. When this happens, the board loses, the organizations and its member lose, and the CEO loses.

Key Attitudes To Adopt

What are the key attitudes a board member should develop to function at peak effectiveness? I suggest the following:

- Learn and respect the organization's chain of command. Communicate with the chief executive officer rather than directly to the staff. Nothing causes more confusion or wastes more energy than side-stepping the established chain of command. Understand the roles of different staff members and respect their limitations.
- Do your homework at all stages. Before you accept a nomination for a board position, find out how much time and effort are required and communicate that information to your employer, if necessary and to your family as well.

- Bring to board meetings a thorough understanding of as many issues as you can study, and then be prepared to learn twice as much - or more- before making a decision. The other side of this coin is that documents for board members should be as succinct and clear as possible.
- Keep an open mind. Listen to all sides of an issue and be flexible before reaching a conclusion.
- Work with other board members, show respect and tolerance for individual interests and personal styles. What plays in Idaho may not play in New York, but at a national meeting of a national board, overall interests should take precedence over regional ideas and behaviours.
- Get to know all other board members, and find a positive way to relate to each, for the good of the organization rather than your personal pleasure. Games and personality clashes obscure the issues and can damage relationships among board members and within the organization. Find out what makes you angry and what you do to make others angry. Try to change both behaviours. A measure of personal harmony is essential for a group to achieve its goals.
- Know the governance of the organization inside out. The most effective board members have substantial service at lower levels in the committee structure and understand how things work.
- Be realistic about what you can achieve. How much can you as a board member do? Realize you are part of a whole that must work together. Consider your other commitments. Set priorities in your personal and professional life so you can meet the demands of active participation on a board.
- Know why you are serving on a volunteer board. Professional enhancement, personal service, ego gratification, an outlet for energy and ideas, a personal agenda - many reasons underlie a decision to serve on a board. Understand what motivates you and , if necessary, be prepared to rethink and adjust your reasons as you grow and mature in your role.
- Admit mistakes, and ask for more information if you need it.
- Last, but not least, serve your association with physical and psychological stamina and sense of humour.

Frederick T. Spahr, CAE, is executive director of the American Speech-Language - Hearing Association, Rockville, Maryland. Marjorie B. Signer, the association's director of editorial services, assisted with the preparation of this article.

2. How To Be A Savvy Board Member

By Mar Jane Kolar, CAE

The role of the board of directors, as simply defined by most association bylaws, is to set policy.

The role of staff is to implement that policy. But that is where simplicity ends and complex reality begins.

One of the greatest challenges by association executives today is trying to create a healthy relationship - between the board and staff so that the needs of the members can be met.

All too frequently, boards become deeply involved in the day-to-day operations of the association. This situation not only frustrates the staff, but also makes it impossible for volunteer leaders to experience a rewarding sense of accomplishment. This feeling of success is critically important because I show the leaders of tomorrow that they, too, will be able to make important contributions.

Why does this role confusion occur, with its attendant crisis and conflicts? I believe there are several causes for this problem.

In many cases, boards become heavily involved in daily affairs because they are trying to fill a void. All too often, professional staff members have not tried to understand their proper role. They find it easier to substitute for the association's leadership by trying to make the decisions themselves rather than to work with the board to help it understand and fulfil its responsibilities. As a result, role reversal occurs.

Confusion also happens because many organizations have never clearly differentiated between board and staff roles. If a board member, for example, is hired to manage the association's central office, whatever corporate culture prevailed within the board will simply be transferred to the association's day-to-day operating environment.

Many associations have also experienced a life cycle that began with the organization having an executive secretary that collected dues and mailed the newsletter. That role expanded over time meeting emerging needs until it actually encompassed policy making. By this time, the chief paid staff member was often called president and had assumed the responsibility of speaking on behalf of the association.

As long as things were going well within the organization, everyone was satisfied. The board did not feel as though it was not participating fully or exercising its responsibilities.

Meetings might have tended toward superficially, and board members may have questioned whether their ideas and opinions really mattered. But association leaders who had grown up with such a system tended to believe that this was simply the way things worked. They focused on the positive experiences of seeing colleagues and enjoying their day in the sun, setting aside any nagging doubts that their organization might be adrift and they were powerless to do anything about it.

A New Wave

Then came a drastic change in the environment in which most associations operated. Members who were willing to accept leadership roles had different values and different

needs. They wanted to the chance to make a difference, to influence the future course of their organization.

The type of organization these new leaders envisioned was one in which there was a real investment in communication at all levels within the organization. The “have and have-nots” regime of the past could no longer attract the best and the brightest. Today’s association members want an environment that fosters a real exchange of ideas and the kind of commitment to grow and change, that would ensure those ideas are brought to fruition.

These members see their association as a kind of “learning society” that enables them to receive state-of-the-art continuing education and training and to work on special assignments that challenge their minds and imaginations. Their ideal association is characterized by a networking structure of teamwork and task forces that bring members at various levels together to address a wide variety of concerns and develop viable solutions. This is the type of organization in which innovation is encouraged and rewarded.

How is this type of organization, which is built on a partnership between elected leaders and professional staff, created? First, a relationship based on mutual respect and trust must be developed. Second, roles must be defined and adhered to by board and staff.

Understanding Roles

The board represents the membership and its dreams for the future of the profession or industry. The staff is hired to help the association’s leaders accomplish their objectives.

Too often, association executives forget that the association does not belong to them - it belongs to the members. A fundamental right of membership is self-determination. The professional staff must work to help that happen.

That is not to say they cannot contribute. Organization’s elected leaders can surely benefit from professional expertise and certainly would not be getting what they paid for if they did not use staff to their best advantage.

Chief executive officers, too, have a leadership role to play, and it is a difficult one. Our role is to help association leaders understand and fulfil their roles.

Chief executives become facilitators for their associations when they create an atmosphere in which the association’s board wants to - and does - become the cons of the field.

Only when an organization has defined its fundamental purpose can goals be developed that are the bases of short - and long-range action plans. This is how results are obtained,

outcomes assessed, and accountability achieved. This is the real role of the board: To create a dynamic association that responds to the needs of its members.

If this is achieved, the association will be the positive force it was originally intended to be when the federal government accorded it special treatment.

Associations enjoy tax and postal privileges because they play a unique role in our society. Ensuring that they continue to do so is the responsibility of those members who have agreed to lead their associations.

Mary Jane Kolar, CAE, is executive vice president of the Association of Government Accountants, Arlington, Virginia.

3. How To Be A Savvy Board Member **By Luther R. Parker, CAE**

As a volunteer leader elected to the board of your association, your primary responsibility is to represent the organization. To do this effectively, you need to adopt the attitude that the association comes first.

Your personal and professional experiences, of course, will colour and enhance your contributions as a board member. But your interests and needs have to take a back seat to those of the profession or industry you are serving.

The next priority of board service is helping your association understand how national and global events and social trends affect its goals and activities. Board members have the knowledge and experience to foresee the emergence of a key issue and its effect on members' practices or businesses. They should also be able to determine how best to manage the issue for the good of the association.

Influencing Change

Change is also within your grasp. Your position on the board gives you the opportunity to influence the direction of events and to promote worthy causes that will move the association forward.

Selling the positions and programs of the association is one of the most exciting opportunities of board service. The enthusiasm and zeal of an association's board directly affects the outcome of any policy project.

To put it another way, you are obligated as a board member support the association's policies and positions with enthusiasm, even when they don't mirror your own views. You will certainly want to try to influence issues while they are still in the decision making stage. But once a vote is taken; all members of the board should support the decision with enthusiasm and commitment.

A Role Model

Service to your trade or profession through board membership does not end with the direct obligations of office. You are a role model for all members. Younger, aspiring members especially look up to you for leadership of your professional or industry and for guidance on what they can do for the good of the group.

You can encourage and challenge them to speak positions of leadership in the association. Your performance on the board - the examples you have set and the words you have spoken - will also greatly influence their future stewardship.

Finally, finding successors to serve on your association's board and serving as their mentor is perhaps the greatest influence you will ever exert on your association.