

President's Column

GOVERNING OURSELVES — 21ST-CENTURY STYLE



Dr. George Sweetnam

When the CDA Board of Governors approved the Steering Committee on Governance Review's report in November, it was tantamount to a client approving an architect's concept drawing. This is the essential preliminary step that lets the committee know it is on the right track, just as the client and architect must realize that they are sharing the same vision.

Future governance of our association must recognize that people have less time to donate and want to use whatever time they can spare more effectively for a specific purpose. The modern volunteer can be accommodated by CDA having fewer standing committees and more single-issue-specific task forces — that is, using volunteers for shorter periods on issues that fully engage them.

The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) did some crystal-ball-gazing into future

trendlines. In its opinion, governance must become flatter. This means fewer levels of governance. CDA currently has a 3-tier structure of board, executive council and management committee. The new structure would have 2 tiers — a general assembly and a board of directors. [In other words, we shed a tier.]

The new structure will function more along the lines of a commercial corporation. By this, I do not mean the pursuit of profit, but rather decision-making that is less political or emotional and more fact-based.

According to the renowned association management "guru" Glenn H. Tecker (whose expertise we tapped into), a knowledge-based governance strategy holds several promises for organizations like ours: increasing the quality of decisions that are taken; dramatically boosting the confidence of decision-makers in the decisions that they make; increasing the understanding that all constituencies within the organization have for the rationale for those decisions; and enhancing the enjoyability of being involved in leadership and governance.

We must now work to align our process and organizational culture to realize the full potential of this new structure and framework. We seek to create ample opportunity for CDA's leaders to spend their time addressing the true substantive issues that are confronting the profession, as opposed to having our time consumed by issues of "administrivia" and operational details.

The board must be comprised of the most competent leaders within our ranks, no matter what region they hail from. It's like when you select a hockey team to represent Canada at an international tournament: you want your best players on the ice, regardless of where they come from. So long as you can replace them based on performance, you have control over the team.

This requires a change in process that is foreign to our traditions of governance, which usually involved a debate and a decision based on committee input. Knowledge-based decision-making is simple and practical, in that it mirrors the way we make personal decisions in our daily lives. You gather the facts, sort them, comprehend them, obtain more of them, and then make up your mind.

Also essential are changes in how we accumulate this information. Through a set of carefully-crafted and distilled questions, we must learn to discuss before we debate and resolve. In other words, the idea that the board is saying "yes" to is an idea that the directors themselves were the architects of.

This exciting new governance model requires us to achieve clarity and consensus on what constitutes success — defined in terms of the benefit or value that will accrue back to the member as a result of what we do. The board's job is to execute its fiduciary responsibility to define what constitutes value for a member and to ensure that we are delivering that value. We must define the outcomes worthy of pursuit, ensure the strategies to pursue them and constantly monitor the progress we are making towards those ends.

We have found an approach that will let us focus our energy on what is important, using a process of dialogue and deliberation that allows us to understand what's involved in the issue and what the alternatives are before we commit to a course of action.

Now that the architectural rendering is complete, the governance steering committee's next task is to sketch in the details as we adjust to the new model. This will be the subject of a future column.

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