

# **One Board, Six Languages**

*By Leigh Wintz, CAE*

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Managing a board can be challenging, but add to the mix language barriers and the task becomes even more complicated, especially where meetings are involved. But at Philadelphia-based Soroptimist International of the Americas (SIA), we have established proven procedures and practices to help our 15-member international board govern.

## **Ensuring board diversity**

Soroptimist, whose name means best for women, has been an international organization since its inception in 1921. In addition to the founding club in Oakland, California, there were clubs in Paris, London, and Vancouver before even a decade had passed. By 1974, the organization was comprised of clubs in four federations, all of them international in scope.

Today, SIA (the largest of the four federations) is composed of 43,000 professional and executive women in 1,500 clubs in 19 countries with only 50 percent of members residing in North America. To ensure a geographic, cultural, and linguistic diversity on the board, we established electoral areas in 1991 that guarantee there will be one board member each from Latin America, Brazil, the Philippines, Canada, and either Korea or Taiwan.

- Three board members are Japanese and the remaining five come from the United States.
- SIA's board is elected by mail ballot (one club, one vote) to two-year terms. Each year, half of the board rotates off and new board members are elected. A president-elect is chosen by all clubs annually, and she and the president remain on the board to serve their terms. The only other officer is a secretary/treasurer who is elected by the board among current members.
- There is no executive committee, and to ensure the holism of the board, most dialogue and deliberation occurs during three on-site meetings each year.

## **Breaking through the language barrier**

Despite the long commitment to being a global organization, SIA's presidents through 1990 had been from either the United States or Canada. Establishing the electoral areas did not immediately give rise to international candidates. It was necessary to tweak the process to provide an additional year of eligibility to run for the office that finally gave us our first non-North American president, a Brazilian, in 1991.

How did we break through the language barrier? Through a deliberate implementation of a policy that states, "Language will not be a barrier to full participation in the organization."

In practical terms, this means:

- Providing interpreters at every board meeting. Most years, we have four professional interpreters in the boardroom. This is an expensive undertaking, but we have learned to keep our language glossaries up to date and to take our interpreters with us to meetings outside of headquarters. Trying to use volunteers or hire interpreters in local cities often severely compromises the quality of communication. And given that our board is very focused on knowledge-based decision making and strategic planning, communication is key.
- Communicating carefully. Staff has learned to be very precise and as concise as possible when preparing background papers, using short sentences and avoiding colloquial language or idioms when making presentations. Speaking slowly and clearly and watching expressions for comprehension have become critical skills for senior staff.

There is a very accepting and comfortable atmosphere at board meetings where understanding what is being said is more important than how it is being said. It is exhilarating to hear someone with only a rudimentary command of English feel comfortable enough with the group to share a comment in a language not her own or to see a non-English speaker take a marker to a flip chart to explain a point, knowing that her interpreter will help her make it. Our professional interpreters facilitate this process and are an integral part of our success.

In June, for the first time, a special meeting of the board was held by teleconference but arranging a suitable time and having interpreters available on the call was problematic. For our organization, such meetings need to be used sparingly.

### **Structuring effective meetings**

Having board members travel from around the world for meetings is an expensive proposition, but one that we feel is a good investment. To maximize this financial commitment, the board meets only three times per year, twice in Philadelphia and once in conjunction with our annual convention, which was held in Canada in August 2004 and in Japan in 2003.

Because of jet lag and the need to rest our interpreters, meetings begin promptly at 9 a.m. and end by 5 p.m. with only social activities in the evening. (If you have ever had to listen to another language in earphones all day long, you will know how exhausting this can be.)

SIA reimburses board members for the following expenses coach airfare (though many of our members upgrade their tickets to business or first class at their expense); lodging (single-room accommodations are a must, and for meetings in Philadelphia, those traveling outside of North America are entitled to fly in a day early to acclimate to the time change); meals; and travel, health, and kidnap/ransom insurance.

It continues to amaze me that our Asian board members don't fall asleep at the board table as the meeting occurs at what should be the middle of their night, but it helps that we never review reports that can (and should) be sent out in the mail. To help participants remain alert, we break for 15 minutes at least every two hours and focus discussions on strategic issues of importance to the future of the organization. Through the course of many years, policies have been developed to take care of routine tasks beforehand so that valuable board meeting time isn't wasted.

Interpreters don't usually attend the social events, but somehow the board all manages to communicate. Friendships have formed and continue despite an initial lack of knowledge about the other person's language or culture. It seems that a smile and the love of chocolate are universal.

## **Communicating online**

While SIA's process is inherently minimally political in nature, I often cite the fact that there are no meetings after the meetings because everyone is too tired and people don't call each other on the phone because it's the wrong time of day and they can't speak the language. E-mail, of course, adds a new dimension to this argument and has actually helped our process because you can get an understandable first-level translation of a message using a translation site. In fact, our Web site has a Babel Fish Translation link on it. While we have many documents in our members-only section that are translated, we have not yet been able to afford fully translated sites, but hope to do so in the future as another part of ensuring that language will not be a barrier to full participation in SIA.

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