

When Board and Staff Align

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Have you ever wondered what might happen if everything you needed to make a successful organization was at your fingertips--like an artist's tubes of paint at the ready for a masterpiece? I was given the opportunity to find out when I invited the volunteer president of the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA), Washington, D.C., to attend a one-day ASAE leadership symposium with me. I'm still not sure if, on that day in 1998, the moon was in the seventh house and Jupiter was aligned with Mars. But for me and for NCURA's staff and executive committee, which would later become an official board of directors as an indirect result of that symposium, some great things were about to occur that would take a very good association and propel it toward excellence.

Central to bringing our organization to another level was the process by which the staff and board came to develop a relationship that makes them all key stakeholders in the organization's effectiveness and success. The elements of that process are described here and may be useful to other organizations.

Observe with new eyes

When I applied for the position of executive director at NCURA, having been on the staff for 15 years, I decided to look at the organization as if viewing it for the first time. What I saw was a small, higher-education association with 3,000 members and a staff of four, which was producing some good continuing education programs and several publications. It was governed by an executive committee made up of representatives from NCURA's seven regional organizations and five standing committees, four officers, the immediate past president, and no more than two presidential appointees. At that time, the executive director was not a member of the committee but could attend meetings. In addition, NCURA had several standing committees in place, all of which were constituency-based and tended to look inward for answers, rather than seeking the best practices of the most successful organizations. New ideas for programs or products often languished in committee--sometimes for one or two years. By the time a program finally appeared, it was likely being offered by another association. Sometimes, when a program was no longer of interest to anyone on one committee, it was passed on to another committee where it was dead on arrival.

Perhaps the best thing I saw in this member-driven association, and had seen for a number of years, was the willingness of the members to volunteer to help not only the organization but also each other. And coming from a service-oriented profession (NCURA members work at colleges, universities, teaching hospitals, and private research organizations where they serve both the faculty researcher and the institution), our members have the ability to understand and appreciate association management and the services the staff provides. In addition, they all have something in common: the will to achieve excellence and to provide continuing education and information to the entire research community.

When I became the executive director of NCURA in 1997, I was focused on my own continuing education, and I spotted a notice for ASAE's Leading Together Symposium. Because I had predicted at one point that the organization would need to move from a member-driven model to a member-staff-driven model to achieve success, a program focused on leading together sounded perfect. My volunteer president was more than willing to attend and, together, we set off for Atlanta and the one-day session led by

Bud Crouch, principal partner, Tecker Consultants, Trenton, New Jersey, that would begin an incredible and fast-paced journey to improved governance, a board-staff partnership, and a more effective association.

Not long after arriving at the meeting room, we heard others talking about how many times they had heard board members say, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," or, "Because that's the way we always do it." And then we heard the words that were the catalyst for NCURA's governance change: "If you sent the past five years of board minutes out to your members and asked them to highlight what was important to them, what would you see?" My board chair and I looked at each other and said, simultaneously, "We need help." The symposium jump-started the process that would take us where we needed to go. Begin with outside experts

Three months later, NCURA's executive committee met for a one-day boot camp (led again by Bud Crouch) and learned about association best practices and what it would take for NCURA to achieve excellence by revising its governance model. Though the workshop was an unbudgeted meeting, it was, perhaps, one of the first investments NCURA made in itself--a practice that continues today. For the 20 participating executive committee members, it was a day filled with illumination as light bulbs went on throughout the room, and the words "Wow" and "Aha" were heard on numerous occasions. One concept that did a lot to raise our awareness of the tools available to us was Crouch's explanation that our association was not an island. Rather, it was a part of a large community of professionals who practice association management with the help of benchmarks and best practices. We, too, could make use of those tools. By the end of the day, everyone understood the concept of knowledge-based strategic governance, a governance structure that

- 1. encourages diversity on the board of directors, with members being chosen because of their expertise rather than their ZIP codes or friendships;*
- 2. allows for rapid response to member needs and is not afraid to go out and ask members what they need; and*
- 3. makes a clear distinction between the roles played by staff and volunteers, thereby building a culture of trust.*

The boot camp made it clear that the more successful organizations look upon staff as partners and professionals who should be trusted to do their jobs, while the board establishes policy and sets direction. Armed with this information, we began to think and speak more strategically.

The assistant executive director of NCURA, Tara Bishop, and I represented the staff at the boot camp. And at the conclusion of the session, the leadership group--including the new staff partners--agreed to meet again to determine what NCURA's future should look like and to see what steps were necessary to make it so.

Plan a preferred future

As author Richard L. Evans once said, "Everyone who got where he is had to begin where he was." Thus, we continued our planning five months later, with the executive committee, the assistant executive director, and I meeting with Bud Crouch for an intensive two-day session. Egos were checked at the door, and sleeves were rolled up as we broke into teams and began mapping out NCURA's future. Teams were selected randomly to ensure a diversity of experience and expertise. The assistant director and I were floaters, participating on each team for a time. In this way, we were able to provide background information when needed and work shoulder-to-shoulder with our members to help build the new organizational structure.

To reshape your organization for increased effectiveness, I'd recommend following a process similar to the one outlined below.

- Look at the organization's history, original purpose, and mission. It's important to determine whether all of these factors are still valid and whether they should remain the same. In our case, we enhanced NCURA's core purpose with the following language: "To contribute to the success of individuals in research administration and advance the field through professional development, the sharing of knowledge, and by fostering community." In addition, we added a set of core values that we continue to use in planning the organization's strategic direction.
- Consider what the organization might become in 5, 10, 20, or even 30 years. Looking into the future in this way, we listed possible opportunities for our association and then listed any barriers or threats that might slow progress (or obliterate the opportunities completely) if not removed. For example, no matter what opportunities we identified, the ponderous nature of NCURA's governance model would likely continue to make it difficult to respond. Removing that obstacle would have to become a top priority.
- Honestly evaluate what is working in the organization and what needs to be changed or improved. Once the past, present, and future had been reviewed, the more difficult part for us began. The executive committee and staff pulled out their magnifying glasses and started to look closely at what was currently working for NCURA and what was not. We scrutinized everything, including infrastructure, in an open and honest way and created lists of strengths and weaknesses. NCURA's governance and committee structures were seen as weaknesses; and the one thing that kept rising to the top in the strengths category was the people who made up NCURA--both members and staff.

By the end of that first day we were soberly optimistic. While the group felt the association's future was limitless, we also acknowledged a number of obstacles--some of them huge--that needed to be removed to achieve the success everyone envisioned.

Reflect on discoveries

We spent the second day of our session forming a set of goals to be accomplished within five years. We reviewed the lists of strengths and weaknesses that we compiled the previous day and identified infrastructure areas in need of review and possible reshaping to accomplish the five-year plan. Breaking into teams, we began to form strategies for each goal and infrastructure piece and to develop milestones by

which to measure progress for each strategy. We identified challenges in five areas: membership, volunteer/committee structure, governance system, communication/technology, and staffing.

Our plans for facing membership challenges provide an idea of how the planning process worked.

1. Establish an overall goal. NCURA's goal for membership was to be its members' primary resource for professional education, knowledge exchange, and individual development.
2. Develop strategies for reaching the goal. Our strategies clustered around technology, community, and professional development opportunities. When it came to focusing on these individual areas, we articulated strategies in the professional development area, for example, that would make NCURA's educational and professional development programs more relevant, accessible, user-friendly, and directly based on what members said they wanted and needed.
3. Identify milestones to measure the effectiveness of the strategies. For the professional development goal, we planned to measure the number of programs developed for newly targeted members, calculate increases in attendance at NCURA conferences, and monitor anticipated increases in NCURA's member retention rate.

Similar goals, strategies, and milestones were created for the other challenge areas.

Dig in

Knowing that it was vital to accomplish our goals, we took some inspiration from the Star Wars character Yoda, who said, "Do or not do. There is no try."

We recognized that to accomplish the goals set out in our strategic plan, we needed to remove the key barrier that we had identified earlier: The organization needed to be fast, fluid, and flexible--which it definitely was not. During the course of the next year, we took apart--on paper--NCURA's committee structure and governance system and rebuilt it. The new plan called for significant changes and included the following:

1. Dissolve a number of standing committees, and base the composition of the remaining committees on competency rather than constituency. To start this process, we developed job descriptions for each of our volunteer positions. If an individual wished to sit on our financial committee, for example, he or she was required to have a financial background and expertise.
2. Form smaller, mission-oriented groups and task forces to deploy for specific tasks and for short periods of time.
3. Transform the nominating committee into a nominating and leadership development committee charged with finding and developing NCURA's future leaders.
4. Convert NCURA's executive committee to a full-fledged board of directors with a new executive committee made up of the officers, with the executive director reporting to them.

As for staffing and operations, we set priorities there as well. Because the executive committee believed that members were firmly committed to electronic educational programming, an immediate investment (from our reserves) was made in NCURA's technological infrastructure. When I determined that additional staff were needed to accomplish the goals of the strategic plan--which included the increase in educational programming--the executive committee was totally aligned with my suggestions and, again, invested part of NCURA's reserves in its future.

Because our first priority was to tackle the technology infrastructure, we added a \$100,000 budget line for technology, which included funds to hire an information technology specialist. While we were prepared to cash in some of our investments in our \$400,000 reserves to cover the increased cost, it turned out that the upgraded technology allowed us to increase the number of revenue-producing educational programs and decrease our printing costs. During the period of the technology upgrades, we increased our revenue by 71 percent, eliminating our need to tap reserves.

Keep constituents informed

Once the initial plans were complete, certain things became obvious. The most important challenge we faced was a complete overhaul of our bylaws, and we anticipated resistance from the regional organizations and, perhaps, from some past presidents. We countered this opposition through multiple methods.

1. NCURA's volunteer president wrote a series of articles that ran in successive issues of our newsletter, explaining why and how changes would be made to improve an already good association.
2. The president and I gave presentations explaining the new structure and strategy at each regional spring meeting. We also met with the regional leadership to answer questions and listen to concerns. By the summer of 1999, the bylaw changes were sent to all members.
3. We scheduled a number of small sessions at NCURA's annual meeting on the request of concerned members. The officers, senior staff, and I met with these individuals and addressed each concern. The most pressing questions:
 - Would a new governance model open the door for greater diversity? We responded that part of the new plan would open up opportunities for all members who wished to become involved and that working to increase minority participation was a major part of that plan.
 - If national committee spots would no longer be filled based on regional affiliation, what would happen to those long-term members who had been slowly working their way up the regional ladder with an eye toward a national committee appointment? To the members with this concern, we illustrated how all individuals would have a greater opportunity for national participation because they'd be able to openly volunteer instead of waiting to be tapped by a regional officer. We also explained that having more short-term task forces and working groups would give many more members an opportunity to get involved.
 - How did we plan to balance "new blood" with experience? We heard this question from our most senior members, many of them past presidents and others who played major roles in building the association. We assured them that their voices would always be heard and their opinions respected and explained our need to develop NCURA's next set of leaders while the current leadership was available to offer mentorship.

Of course, life would not be enjoyable without the occasional surprise, and this was the case during the NCURA annual business meeting, when an amendment was made that would allow the new nominating and leadership development committee to be constituency-based rather than competency-based as we had planned. This amendment was accepted, along with another amendment to disallow more associate members into the regular membership category. With these changes, the ballots were sent out and the new bylaws were (almost unanimously) approved. The only bylaws change since then was last year's decision to broaden the regular membership category to allow in more associate members.

The age of Aquarius?

Five years after our governance revamp, NCURA's membership has grown from 3,000 to 4,500 due in large part to new products and services that have added value to membership. We are quite close to being a fully electronic association, with an online membership directory that updates itself daily, an electronic newsletter, electronic conference agendas, and a special online resource area called an "electronic community" where members go for help on specific topics.

Other significant outcomes that have resulted from our new governance model include the following:

- More members are volunteering, and electronic calls for volunteers are made several times a year.
- The membership is more responsive to association needs--an electronic poll sent out earlier this year generated 500 responses within the first two hours.
- Staff and members partner on task forces and committees, with staff often being acknowledged for the expertise they bring to the table.
- The number of educational programs has increased by 157 percent and they now include live satellite broadcasting, online workshops and tutorials, and additional Web-based national conferences.
- Revenue from educational programs is up by more than 200 percent--from \$895,000 in 1998 to more than \$2 million in 2003--and is being reinvested in the organization.
- Partnerships with other associations are blossoming, and earlier this year, one organization sent its members to a NCURA special topic conference rather than hold its own annual meeting. We work with the Association of University Technology Managers, Northbrook, Illinois, and the National Association of College and University Attorneys, Washington, D.C., among others, to produce such special-topic conferences. Other joint projects focus on fostering relationships between industry and universities, thereby helping increase our nation's overall research endeavors.
- Leadership development programs have become a priority. NCURA offers training opportunities to its regional leadership and, each year, brings in Bud Crouch to educate incoming board members on the latest in strategic governance and to make certain all parties understand the roles of staff and board. This program has expanded to include new or up-and-coming regional and national leaders. And, this year, NCURA invested in itself once again and launched a Leadership Development

Institute. The institute, designed to increase the number and caliber of NCURA's future leaders, is almost entirely financed by the organization.

Our next challenge is to handle our rapid growth. Success is a precarious spot, and we must work hard to maintain it. To that end, we are forming a futures task force that will look at the best practices of those organizations that have been able to sustain success.

Whether the moon is in the seventh house or Jupiter is aligned with Mars, the National Council of University Research Administrators understands that good things can happen when board and staff are aligned. The partnership holds firm as our strategic plan continues to guide us.

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