

Boards find younger members can help move group forward

NSSGA chair and CEO, grappling with consolidation, look to next generation to help conceive, implement future strategic plans

By William Ehart

You're not getting any younger. But maybe your board should be.

Experts say association boards are getting more diverse—including in age range. They say reaching out to younger members and to those with essential competencies is critical to the healthy evolution of the organization.

"I would argue that we need youth on our boards, and we need youth on our boards in a hurry," said consultant Harrison Coerver, president of Boca Grande, Fla.-based Harrison Coerver and Associates.

The \$7 million-revenue National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association—one of Coerver's clients—is listening.

At its annual meeting March 20-24, NSSGA will consider changes to its by-laws, including those that govern the composition of its nominating committee, said CEO Mike Johnson. Currently, that panel is made up strictly of past board chairs. The group has a longstanding and growing Young Leaders group, but none of its members is on the nominating committee.

Johnson worked with board chair Charlie Luck, CEO of Richmond, Va.-based Luck Cos., who formed a task force to study the issue. Luck, grandson of the company founder, is a former member of the Young Leaders group.

A path to involvement

"One of the things that became obvious really quickly was that we hadn't created an easy, understandable path for someone who ages out of our Young Leaders program at 40 to stay involved in the association," Johnson said. "We hadn't given them a clear path to get involved with committees and certainly not a path to get involved with the board."

One issue was that nominating committee members were not familiar with the most talented and active members of the Young Leaders group. Under the proposed new by-laws, the chair and the immediate past chair of Young Leaders will sit on the nominating committee, Johnson said. The name of the panel itself would be changed to the Nominating and Leadership Development Committee.

The changes are needed to get NSSGA where it needs to go, Johnson said, so that its

board can keep up with the strategic plans it is creating.

"As we're thinking of the strategic plan of the future, we'll have the folks in the room who are going to be leading the things that need to be done to achieve those goals and objectives," he said.

Johnson said the newer generation will help the association reflect the technological changes in the industry, such as the shift to remote technology—including drones—and new logistical software. For instance, Luck's company has developed a remote-controlled loader that keeps the operator out of harm's way while working high rock walls, he said.

The industry also is consolidating, meaning that the number of owner-operators is shrinking, Johnson said. Reaching deeper into member companies will help engage more people in the association and help with grassroots advocacy efforts, he said.

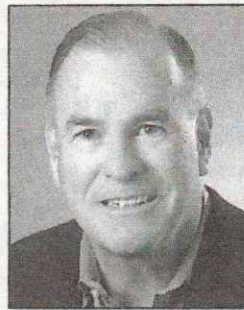
Coerver said boards should have a range of generations and experience.

"Good teams should have rookies and veterans," he said. "Our boards are too veteran-oriented. That lack of youth deprives us of innovation and creativity and risk-taking."

Coerver advocates competency-based boards, where members are chosen for skills and experience and not just constituent representation. Younger members can introduce technology skills.

"There isn't a board around that doesn't know it needs a good treasurer," he said. "All I'm saying is, let's take that to some different levels—what about technology?"

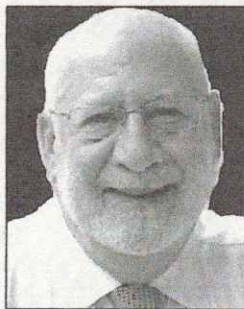
"We just need to take the concept further and be thoughtful about what it is we need on the board, what are the challenges, what are the



Coerver



Johnson



Tecker



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opportunities and what kind of skills and talents are needed," Coerver said.

A balanced board

Board consultant Glenn Tecker, chairman and co-CEO of Yardley, Pa.-based Tecker International Consulting, said boards need to have a balance of political representation, expertise and diversity on a number of levels, including age, gender and ethnic group.

"The issue of having different generational perspectives represented on the board is only one of a large number of variables that need to be accounted for," he said.

But he said the millennial generation—some of whose members are now in their 30s—are eager to take up board seats vacated by retiring baby boomers.

"Having individuals on the board who are comfortable in employing technology as a mechanism for getting the work of the board and the organization done and creating opportunities for broad member engagement is what's needed now," he said.

Veteran nonprofit attorney Jonathan Howe of Chicago-based Howe & Hutton cautions against too much youth, inexperience and lack of stature on association boards. He said some CEOs have come to regret efforts to be more egalitarian—and not just because board members may be reluctant to approve CEO salaries higher than their own.

"You want board members who can relate to what you're trying to get done," he said. "People are comfortable with decisions they have made in their own lives. You want somebody who has made similar types of decisions as you're going to be required to make," Howe said.