

A New Governance Structure

By Mike Dwyer, CAE

One of the topics discussed at the recent DVSAE Demon Exchange held here at Association Headquarters was the challenges faced by our association management colleagues here in the Delaware Valley in the area of governance. More specifically, as the time available to commit by our volunteer leaders to the organizations we manage dwindles, we as staff are left trying to accomplish more with fewer volunteer hours at our disposal. The theme of the need for more volunteers to step up and move our associations forward in a new direction appears to be more prevalent than ever.

While the staff is responsible for implementing the strategic goals of the boards we serve, we direct volunteer-run associations whose governance, direction, and ultimate strategic success is dependent upon the elected leaders. Everything from conceptualizing the meetings to managing the budget to recruiting new members is the job of the membership as played out through the direction of the board members to the staff.

It can be difficult though to feel invested in an organization – even if you do pay dues – if you're not sure what's going on. So to address this need for growing more grassroots support for the organization's we manage, two of the board's I serve, working in concert with the staff, have developed a revised leadership structure. Actually, the idea for this new structure came to me through a colleague on the board of AMCi, the Association Management Company Institute. We simply adapted it for our purposes.

For one of the organization's I serve as Executive Director, beginning this year there will be three new steering committees reporting to the board – membership, marketing, and finance – under which all activities the organization undertakes will be coordinated. The steering committees will be led by a group of “high-level stakeholders,” in this case the board members who are responsible for providing guidance on the overall strategic direction for the organization. The steering committees will invite strategic input from the membership by creating task forces – smaller groups of members/volunteers joined temporarily to accomplish some task or take part in some organized collective action, with a defined mission, and a defined time line. And that is the key to this new structure – understanding that as business owners or professionals, our board members often have very little extra time to give to the organizations we manage. As such, in our case, the board is moving towards this new model to get more members involved in setting the future course for the organization.

Each task force has a board-approved plan that is tied directly to the fiscal year budget and the primary strategies of the association. This is the “roadmap” for each task force. The steering committees will keep the organization focused and aware of all the other related task groups' activities to encourage a branded approach and reduce duplication of effort.

The primary goal of this approach is to provide a streamlined methodology to leadership; to recruit new bodies to get involved at the task group level as a sort of testing ground to find future board members; to implement a more strategic approach to the way the organization operates; and to show members that the time commitment to the organization can be very limited especially within the task groups since they will have a specific focus and a specific time line for accomplishing their mission.

If all goes as planned, one activity slated for the task forces is Member Outreach Day which will be held during the association's annual show in Las Vegas in the fall. The purpose of this meeting is to outline the goals and initiatives of the association to all members, welcome new volunteers into the task forces, and provide another networking opportunity. This will also be a very visible way for the three steering committee chairs to clarify their position to the membership and act as leaders and provide resources in keeping the task forces on track, as well as identifying future leaders.

Our hope is that by inviting more members to get involved with the direction of the association we will not only see a deeper commitment to the organization from more of the association's existing members but also more growth. The organization is in a better position than it has been in years. Our members are strong, our association is strong. It only makes sense that we should appeal to the larger industry we serve. By getting more members involved at a grassroots level, the board and staff will have a greater understanding of what the members need and expect from the association to be successful and how to reach out to others in the industry.

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