



Association Leadership Study

[January 2017]

TABLE *of* CONTENTS

Snapshot of Findings	3
Executive Summary	5
Methodology.	8
How Can You Use this Study?	8
Demographics of Quantitative Survey Respondents.	9
The High-Performing Association Leader	11
Leadership Learned	13
Leadership Skills.	14
Challenges as an Association Leader	15
Challenges When Working with a Board	17
Qualities of an Effective Board.	18
Effective Board Outcomes	19
Data.	20
Board Chair	20
Involvement in Board Member Recruitment and Selection	22
Traits of a Low-Functioning Board	22
Strategies Used by Association Leaders to Help Boards be Successful.	23
About the Authors.	24

SNAPSHOT *of* Findings



TRAITS *of an* ASSOCIATION LEADER

RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED THE TOP 3 TRAITS AN ASSOCIATION LEADER SHOULD POSSESS AS:

- 1 Being **HONEST** and **ETHICAL**
- 2 Having the ability to **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**
- 3 Being able to **INSPIRE AND MOTIVATE** the staff and the board

77.9%

of respondents said that, **YES**, you need different leadership skills when working with a volunteer board versus non-volunteer leaders and staff.

93.1%

of respondents said the best way to develop association leadership skills is through experience.

OUTCOMES

WHEN EFFECTIVE BOARDS ARE ASSEMBLED, ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS, THE TOP RESULTS ARE:

- 1 More **INTEREST IN VOLUNTEERING**
- 2 The profile of the association **IMPROVES OR GROWS** in the industry
- 3 **COMMITTEES AND TASK FORCES** reach their **GOALS**

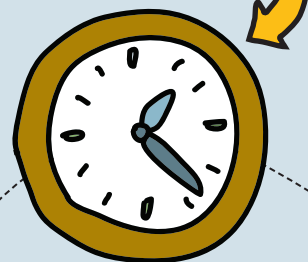


CHALLENGES

The **BIGGEST CHALLENGE** respondents face as an association leader is never having enough time

RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED THE TOP 3 CHALLENGES WHEN WORKING WITH A BOARD AS:

- 1 Fully leveraging **VOLUNTEER LEADERS' KNOWLEDGE** and time
- 2 Leading the **BOARD** down a **STRATEGIC PATH**
- 3 Managing the board's **EXPECTATIONS** about what the **ASSOCIATION STAFF** can handle



BOARD *and* ASSOCIATION LEADERSHIP DYNAMIC

As the **CEO/President/Executive Director,**

56.6% OF RESPONDENTS

said **YES**, they are involved in board member recruitment or selection.

When an association has a **HIGH-FUNCTIONING BOARD**, the relationship between the board chair and the association's **CEO/president/executive director** is strong.

43.18% agreed they see *more success* when the board is co-led by the board chair and the association's CEO/president/executive director.

The number 1 trait of a low-functioning board is that they are **NOT STRATEGIC** – they're "in the weeds"

53.4%

said that, **YES**, as an association leader, they have helped a non-performing board become a high-performing board.

78.4% of respondents said bringing too much data to a board meeting can be *ineffective*.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At AH, we wanted to delve deeper into aspects of association leadership, with the goal to learn what leadership practices nurture great boards as well as the skills association leaders need to be most effective.

We received responses from association staff leaders, the majority being from trade and professional associations, for questions regarding:

- What are the qualities and traits of a successful association leader?
- What are the qualities and traits of an effective board?
- As an association leader, what are some examples of success when working with an effective board? What are some challenges when working with a low-functioning board?

The following is a summary of responses.

Important Skills and Traits to Possess as an Association Leader

Respondents identified the top three traits an association leader should possess are being **honest and ethical**, having the ability to **build relationships**, and being able to **inspire** and **motivate** the staff and the board. In order to build meaningful relationships with their boards, strategic partners, and other stakeholders, association leaders must be **frank**, but respectful, and need to be **consistent with their style, communications, and vision**. The ability of an association leader to build valuable relationships, based on trust and honesty, has resulted in the establishment of many fruitful partnerships.

Many respondents felt that as an association leader, they were able to use their business skills to advance society and an industry. They believe in working for an organization that wants to advance change and it's in their DNA to serve and advocate.

Leadership Learned

According to respondents, leadership skills are learned **through experience**, from **former managers**, and having an **innate drive to succeed**. In fact, learning what *not* to do from former managers was a key theme. Belonging to **local and national professional associations**, such as the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), as well as **earning a CAE designation** were mentioned as a way to enhance association leadership skills. When it comes to **blogs**, **websites**, and **events** respondents regularly follow, visit, and attend, the top outlets were **Associations Now**, **ASAE's annual conference**, **BoardSource**, **ASAE's CEO Symposium**, and **regional SAE meetings**.

Different Leadership Skills are Needed When Working with Volunteers

An overwhelming number of respondents felt that **different leadership skills are needed** when **working with a volunteer board** versus non-volunteer leaders and staff. The responses indicated that working with volunteers requires a **"nurturer"** persona. The style of "the nurturer" focuses on helping to improve people's strengths, and is especially useful in building skills to develop leaders.

Motivational leadership is another skill needed, as engagement with volunteers has to be meaningful due to more time constraints and no monetary compensation when it comes to volunteering. It was noted that it is more difficult to delegate to volunteers than to staff, and as a leader, association executives must be able to **motivate volunteers differently** and **understand their triggers for engagement**. Respondents indicated one of the most powerful motivational leaders is the person who practices **"servant leadership."** Respondents noted that they see themselves as someone who does everything possible to help others to perform at their best

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

and often forgo recognition, even if the idea was theirs or from the staff.

In addition, the **art of persuasion** is an important skill, as is the ability to get volunteers to consider things from a different perspective, as they may be too close to the issue or cause to see things objectively. Last, when working with a volunteer board, an association leader must be very good at **developing consensus**.

Although some of these traits are needed when working with volunteers and **paid staff**, respondents noted that because staff has a clear job description, association leaders can hold them more **accountable** and to **deadlines**. Although staff is expected to perform according to their established roles and responsibilities, association leaders must impart a sense of purpose, a sense of inclusion, and obtain buy-in from them as well.

Common Challenges as an Association Leader

Respondents cited the top three challenges of an association leader as **never having enough time**, having the **staff with the right skills aligned with the work that has to be done**, and keeping up with **trends** and providing a **fresh perspective**.

Common Challenges When Working with a Board

Respondents identified the top three challenges when working with a board as fully **leveraging volunteer leaders' knowledge** and **time**, **leading the board down a strategic path**, and **managing the board's expectations** about what the **association staff can handle**.

Qualities of an Effective Board

To be an effective board, board members must be **trusting** of their **CEO** and **staff**, **supportive** of the **CEO**, **focused** on **advancing the industry/profession**

and the **overall mission** of the association, **ethical**, and **engaged**. To respondents, the definition of an “engaged” board means being **prepared**, **responsive** to **membership**, **involved**, and **committed**.

When effective boards are assembled, the outcome is **more interest in volunteering**, the **profile** of the **association improves** or grows in the **industry**, and **committees** and **task forces** reach their **goals**.

Board Chair/CEO Relationship and Traits of an Effective Chair

When an association has a high-functioning board, the relationship between the board chair and the association's CEO/president/executive director is strong. **More than 43.18% agreed that the board is co-led by the board chair and the association's CEO/president/executive director**. Only 13.64 percent thought the association's CEO/president/executive director could lead a highly functional board alone and only 15.91 percent thought the board chair could lead a highly functional board alone.

Common themes from respondents on the effectiveness of a board chair are an engaged board chair **supports the CEO** and also **assists in making decisions so that initiatives can move forward**. They **inspire the rest of the group to action** and **keep them on task**. In addition, a good chair is one who **has been a good member**. They are vetted and respected; **they know how to serve, support, and lead**.

Data

More than **78.41%** of respondents believed that **bringing too much data to a board meeting can be ineffective** and lead to “analysis paralysis” for many boards. Providing relevant data without overloading them will help the board make informed decisions and prevent them from getting stuck digging through data points.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Board Member Recruitment and Selection

56.57% of responding CEOs were involved in board member recruitment and selection. From an association leader's point of view, the benefits of being involved include **knowing which members** are **active**, **feeling more involved** in the **guiding** process, understanding **member skill sets**, **helping to ensure the integrity** in the overall process, aiding in **establishing** the **candidate criteria**, providing input into the **special skills** or **perspectives** the **board composition needs**, and **keeping** focus on **organizational vision**. Oftentimes, when association leaders are not involved in the recruitment and selection process, less qualified or engaged people are elected.

Traits of a Low-Functioning Board

A low-functioning board occurs when members **are not strategic**, are **“in the weeds,”** and when they **don't understand their role** and **responsibilities**.

According to the survey results, the number of members on a board does not correlate with level of effectiveness. However, respondents felt that more **than 16 board members** are **“too many.”**

Strategies used by Association Leaders to Help Boards be Successful

Focusing on communications, **conducting a board orientation** or “annual governance workshop,” **setting expectations**, and **focusing on strategic discussions** were common strategies used to help boards be successful.

METHODOLOGY

▶ **W**e started with a qualitative research approach, in partnership with Kaiser Insights LLC, and spoke with 13 association leaders (CEOs, presidents, and executive directors who were non-volunteers/paid staff). These leaders were referred to us and the majority were seasoned and held a position for more than eight years. The qualitative piece of research helped us identify key trends and themes, which ultimately aided us in the development of a quantitative survey that was sent to association CEOs, presidents, and executive directors from a variety of association sizes and locations. There were no set limitations imposed on recruitment for these demographics, however, if an executive director from AH took the survey, their answers were removed in order to not bias the information.

We received responses from 144 (13 we spoke with on the phone and 131 filled out a survey) association staff leaders, the majority being from trade and professional associations. Throughout this report, we will refer to the participants as “respondents” or “CEOs.”

HOW *can you* USE THIS STUDY?

▶ **T**here are a variety of ways to use the results of this study.

Association Staff Leaders:

- Self evaluations
- Staff evaluations, especially for team members who want to move up to an executive level
- Share results with your board and talk openly about your relationship and how everyone can work best together
- Provide results to your human resource team; ask potential association leadership candidates questions that correlate with common challenges when working with a board, what strengths they see in themselves, etc.
- Participate in blogs, events, and other channels identified as useful resources
- Adapt some of your current practices and initiatives based upon findings
- In your resume and when applying to association leadership jobs

Board Members:

- Self and board evaluations
- Staff evaluations
- During interviews for association staff leadership. Ask candidates questions that correlate with common challenges when working with a board, strengths they see in themselves, etc.
- Adapt some of your current practices and initiatives based upon findings

DEMOGRAPHICS *of* QUANTITATIVE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Organization type	Response Percent
Professional Association	51.8%
Trade Association	35.3%
Foundation	0.0%
Other	12.9%

Tax-exempt status for their organization	Response Percent
501(c)6	49.5%
501(c)3	37.6%
501(c)4	3.5%
Other	9.4%

Where is your organization headquartered?	Response Percent
We are a national organization based in the United States	40.0%
We are a chapter/regional-based organization in the United States	35.3%
We are a statewide-based organization	10.6%
We are a provincial/regional-based organization in Canada	4.6%
We are a national organization based in Canada	2.4%
Other	7.1%

Top industries represented	Response Percent
Healthcare/Pharmaceutical	21.2%
Education	15.3%
Construction	8.2%
Accounting/Banking/Financial Services	7.1%
Manufacturing	3.5%
Real Estate	3.5%

How many members are on your current board?	Response Percent
11–15	38.8%
16–20	24.7%
6–10	20.0%
More than 20	15.3%
Other	1.2%

Organization's annual revenue	Response Percent
\$1,000,000–\$2,999,999	27.1%
\$500,000–\$999,999	20.0%
\$3,000,000–\$5,999,999	18.8%
\$250,000–\$499,999	15.3%
Less than \$249,000	8.2%
\$6,999,999–\$9,999,999	4.7%
Over \$10 million	4.7%
Rather not say	1.2%

How long have you worked in the association and/or non-profit industry?	Response Percent
More than 20 Years	38.9%
16–20 Years	23.5%
11–15 Years	16.5%
6–10 Years	9.4%
3–5 Years	8.2%
1–2 Years	3.5%
Less than 1 year	0.0%

Which of the following best describes your current title?	Response Percent
Executive Director	67.1%
CEO	15.3%
Managing Director	7.1%
President	5.9%
Other	4.6%

Age range	Response Percent
45–54 years old	32.9%
55–64 years old	29.4%
35–44 years old	16.5%
65–74 years old	15.3%
Prefer not to say	3.5%
25–34 years old	2.4%
18–24 years old	0.0%
75 years or older	0.0%

Gender	Response Percent
Female	52.29%
Male	42.35%
Prefer not to say	5.36%

Background with non-profit and for-profit work	Response Percent
I have worked at both non-profits and for-profits	45.9%
I have only worked at non-profits	38.8%
I have only worked at for-profits before my current role	9.4%
Other	5.9%
This is my first and only job	0.0%

THE *High-Performing* ASSOCIATION LEADER

Steering Strategy

One insight that became apparent quickly is that steering an association is becoming more complex. Managing a staff, working with the board, advancing a profession or industry, growing a business, and meeting the needs of members is a big task and always has been. What has been changing more recently is the pace at which the world of work is evolving: the environment, competitors, regulations, technology, expectations, and more. More data is available, which aids in data-based decision making, but also takes time and talent to interpret it correctly.

Many of the respondents reported that years ago association boards would develop the vision and the CEO and staff would act on that vision. But now, because of the fast changes impacting associations, professions, and industries, board members cannot keep up with the complexity and rely on CEOs as leaders or at least partners in creating that vision. This changes the CEOs role, no longer do association CEOs translate and act on the board's strategy, many CEOs are taking far greater roles in steering boards through the strategy.

An association's CEO is a constant. While board members usually rotate every one to three years, the CEO is the continuous player who holds the vision into the future. In this role, they are deciding what background information they give to the board and how to meter out this information by thinking through:

- the priority of the steps that need to be taken to get to the future vision and where they are now
- how to keep the board members energized and engaged by working through challenges
-

- how much information board members really need, balancing transparency with respect for the volunteer leader's time

Skills and Traits

Respondents identified the top three traits an association leader should possess:

- Being **honest and ethical** (weighted average of 4.68 out of 5)
- Being able to **build relationships** (weighted average of 4.47 out of 5)
- Being able to **inspire** and **motivate** the staff and the board (weighted average of 4.38 out of 5)

It was clear from the research that in order to build meaningful relationships with their boards, strategic partners, and other stakeholders, association leaders must be **frank**, but respectful, and need to be **consistent with their style, communications, and vision**. **Communications** must be **authentic** and **frequent**.

The ability of an association leader to build valuable relationships, based on trust and honesty, has resulted in the establishment of many fruitful partnerships.

"It is extremely important that when dealing with the board I maintain a strict sense of consistency. As an association leader, one cannot make up the rules to please different factions each time an issue arises. I have found that as long as I stay consistent to our bylaws and board policies it almost always gives me the support I need to thread the board through some very difficult political issues."

THE *High-Performing* ASSOCIATION LEADER

Why be an Association Leader

When asked to finish the sentence, “I am an association leader because _____,” selected responses included:

- I can make a difference
- It allows me to be a business leader for an organization advancing society and an industry
- I’m able to use a variety of skills to mentor, foster, and grow the organization, the industry, and the support staff
- It aligns well with my passion for helping non-profit organizations to thrive and my diverse skills and extensive leadership experience
- It is rewarding to be in a position to make a difference
- I believe in the power of associations—the ability for an industry to work together to improve the business climate for all
- I believe in working for an organization working towards the greater good for everyone
- I want to advance change
- It’s in my DNA to serve and advocate
- I call this work choreography: helping the parts of the performance sync in an effective and enjoyable way.

“I am an association leader because it’s in my DNA to serve and advocate.”

LEADERSHIP LEARNED

Respondents who were given the opportunity to choose the types of ways leadership skills could be learned, top results revealed leadership skills are learned **through experience** (93.13%), from **former managers** (66.41%), and having an **innate drive to succeed** (68.7%). In fact, learning what *not* to do from former managers was a key theme.

“I’m one of those people who strives to be the leader that I’ve always wanted to follow. I’ve worked with plenty of bosses and plenty for board chairs that I’ve seen who are helpful and supportive and movement making... I like to emulate what I like in others. I also look at some of their mistakes and make sure to never do that.”

Belonging to **local and national professional associations**, such as the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), as well as **earning a CAE designation** were mentioned as ways to enhance association leadership skills. The Certified Association Executive (CAE) program from the ASAE is designed to elevate professional standards, enhance individual performance, and designate association professionals who demonstrate the knowledge essential to manage an association in today’s challenging environment.

When it comes to resources, such as **blogs, websites, and events**, the top five outlets respondents regularly follow, visit, and attend are:

- o **Associations Now** (65.85%)
- o **ASAE’s annual conference** (37.8%)
- o **BoardSource** (32.93%)
- o **ASAE’s CEO Symposium** (29.27%)
- o **Regional SAE meetings** (28.05%)

Highlighted Thought Leaders and Go-to Resources Mentioned

Cynthia Mills, owner of The Leaders Haven

Lyn McDonell from The Accountability Group

Seth Kahan, www.visionaryleadership.com

ASAE Certificate Program in Association Management, specifically the module on developing your leadership potential

A course called Building an Exceptional Board facilitated by the founder of BoardSource

Race for Relevance by Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers, CAE

Strengths Based Leadership by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie

Blinkist, 1,500+ best-selling nonfiction books transformed into powerful shorts you can read or listen to in just 15 minutes

Todd Henry’s Louder Than Words

Brené Brown’s Rising Strong

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

An overwhelming number of respondents (77.86%) felt that **different leadership skills are needed** when **working with a volunteer board** versus non-volunteer leaders and staff. The responses indicated that working with volunteers requires a **“nurturer”** persona. The style of “the nurturer” focuses on helping to improve peoples’ strengths, and is especially useful in building skills to develop leaders.

Motivational leadership is another skill needed, as engagement with volunteers has to be meaningful due to more time constraints and no monetary compensation when it comes to volunteering. It was noted that it is more difficult to delegate to volunteers than to staff, and as a leader, association executives must be able to **motivate volunteers differently** and **understand their triggers for engagement**.

Motivational leadership is the ability to **focus, uplift** and **inspire people** to perform at their best. A key characteristic of association leaders is to **set high standards of accountability for themselves** and **their board’s behaviors**. Respondents indicated one of the most powerful motivational leaders is the person who practices what is called, **“servant leadership.”** Respondents noted that they see themselves as someone who does everything possible to help others to perform at their best, and often forgo recognition, even if the idea was theirs or from the staff.

In addition, the **art of persuasion** is an important skill, as is the ability to get volunteers to consider things from a different perspective when they may be too close to the issue or cause to see things objectively. On the flipside, an association leader must also listen very carefully to their board, as they bring powerful information and knowledge.

Last, when working with a volunteer board, an association leader must be very good at **developing consensus**. Gathering the opinions and thoughts of volunteer leaders and then working to come up with a solution that everyone

Focused on Servant Leadership

It’s about putting others before yourself. Putting the mission before yourself. CEOs say this in many different ways:

- “You have to be a bit egoless. The CEO of a for-profit can be the big cheese. As a CEO of an association you are never really in charge. It’s all about servant leadership, shared recognition, shared leadership. I’ve always understood this. I look at my job as a caretaker. My job is working behind the scenes and stepping aside to let others take the credit. I should not be the face of the organization.”
- “Being open. Being able to laugh at yourself. Being able to talk to people just like I’m everyone else. I’m just one of the team, I just have a different job. We all have jobs to do if we are all going to succeed. Being able to step out of the CEO role. If one of my staff is under a deadline, I’ll be the first one to say “how can I help?” I’m not there to say “this is your job, you do it, I’m here to make sure you succeed.” My job is to allow them to succeed at what they are doing.”
- “You can’t look at this as just a job. It’s got to be a calling. You are here to do a public good. You need to embrace that and defend it. You need to mentor people—especially the millennials. It’s a privilege. We don’t make that much money. We don’t have the benefits and perks. That’s not relevant. What is relevant is we’re helping the communities we live in do better.”

will agree with is an important skill. When working with staff, some respondents said they use a similar methodology of decision making, but ultimately, the CEO makes the final decision.

Although some of these traits are needed when working with volunteers and **paid staff**, respondents noted that because staff has a clear job description, association leaders can hold them more **accountable** and to **deadlines**. Although staff is expected to perform according to their established roles and responsibilities, association leaders must impart a sense of purpose, a sense of inclusion, and obtain buy-in from them as well.

CHALLENGES *as an* ASSOCIATION LEADER

One CEO explained some of the challenges as an association leader by saying, “You are straddling many worlds. You are running a business, you are running a for-profit business. We don’t call it that, but it is. You are running a staff and an office. And you are trying to drive change in the industry. It’s challenging. Most of us have really important missions AND we have to bring in enough money to drive that mission. You need to learn the industry even though you are not a member. Learn to run a business. Learn to lead a board. Learn to drive a mission. So it’s time. How do you have time to do this? I’m in an industry that

changes every 30 seconds. So keeping on top of all that while running a business.”

Respondents cited the top three challenges of an association leader as:

- **Never having enough time** (weighted average of 3.65 out of 4)
- Having the **staff with the right skills aligned with the work that has to be done** (weighted average of 3.23 out of 4)
- Keeping up with **trends** and providing a **fresh perspective** (weighted average of 3.01 out of 4)

CEOs Talk About their Challenges in Leading

Balancing staff skills with the work: “The biggest challenge is making sure I have the right people with the right skill set focusing on the highest priorities. Keeping all this in line is the biggest challenge. The biggest opportunity for breakdown is when you don’t have the right people on the right priorities.” And, “staff challenges, managing staff, and trying to balance quality work and work output with the people I have on my team. Trying to assess ‘are you the right person for this project at this point in time?’ If the answer is no what does mean – no, never, or just no for this project? Do I invest, do I cut my losses?” And, “no one here has a business mindset. They run classes that make no money. A lot of non-profit employees don’t really understand the business. And they don’t want to. They need to watch the budget and they need to think of ways to deliver income. They need to get projections closer to being right.”

Change management: “The biggest one I have is change management within my staff. I have a staff with only two people who have less time in than I do. I’ve got a very veteran staff. It’s so difficult to change that. It’s a

slow, evolutionary, changing staff. The mindset is ‘we’ve always done it this way, so we can’t get rid of anything.’ One of my big issues here—it never goes away—is an idea comes up and the tendency is to say, ‘That won’t work.’ I say ‘That’s not good enough. Don’t come to me with a problem, come with the proposed options or solutions.’”

Growing talent: “The pressure to want to do well for your staff. You want to provide a good, nurturing environment. But if there’s no budget or we’re going through some changes and they are stressed I wonder, are they getting satisfaction out of their job?” And, “You have to keep developing opportunities for others to grow. Associations don’t have as deep of an acumen for this but we are now competing with for-profits so we need to focus on this, too.”

Dealing with problem employees: “The counseling process. It’s communicating directly, tactfully, but firmly that things are not going well. Delivering unpleasant news is not at all good for me. I get really worked up inside delivering bad news to people.” And, “How do you communicate with them without hurting their feelings when they are not being effective?”

CHALLENGES *as an* ASSOCIATION LEADER

Understanding what the market is demanding

and being **able to communicate** this with your board was an additional challenge. One respondent* noted a time when they were able to provide a fresh perspective based on data: “There a clear value gap between what the association was providing and what the market demanded—symptom was declining affiliation rates and attendance at events. I personally talked with more than half of our members, unveiled a campaign with a raft of new initiatives for the next year, and focused on member needs. I recommended cancelling several activities that were sacred cows, because they no longer met the value test. The leadership skills involved were creating a vision (value and relevance), embedding it into a strategy, developing an action plan, and then driving execution.” *Respondent is from a chapter/regional based trade association in the accounting/banking/financial services industry with annual revenue between \$1,000,000 – \$2,999,999. They have worked in the association and/or non-profit industry for 11-15 years.*

Providing **training for the board** was another challenge identified by respondents. One** provided an example of how to address this challenge: “We provide extensive volunteer leadership training from the time they start on a committee right up to the president. For example, we have 40 chapters and each president-elect comes to an intensive 2.5-day boot camp on communications including conflict resolution, presentation skills, and media training. With all the training, we don’t have as many challenges as we used to.” *Respondent is from a Canadian trade association in the real estate industry with annual revenue over \$10 million. They have worked in the association and/or non-profit industry for more than 20 years.*

Building trust with their boards and staff was not identified as a top challenge, nor was being involved in board member recruitment or selection.

CHALLENGES *when* WORKING WITH A BOARD

▶ Respondents identified the top three challenges when working with a board as:

- Fully **leveraging volunteer leaders' knowledge and time** (weighted average of 2.85 out of 3)
- **Leading the board down a strategic path** (weighted average of 2.79 out of 3)
- **Managing the board's expectations about what the association staff can handle** (weighted average of 2.78 out of 3)

It was noted that association leaders must be able to lead their board down a strategic path. One respondent* said, "Often boards know what needs to be done but are afraid to pull the trigger on large, multi-year initiatives. Knowing the timing was right, and the board really wanted to launch a new event, I helped give them the tools and confidence to move forward." *Respondent is from a US trade association in the consumer products industry with annual revenue between \$1,000,000 – \$2,999,999. They have worked in the association and/or non-profit industry for 3-5 years.*

Planning is Key to Effectively Working with a Board:

Create the agenda: "We have a strategic agenda. We talk about trends, environmental factors, what are the demographics, and we talk about scenario planning to be able to react to those trends." And, "I make sure the agenda is high quality. Also there is time on the agenda to have generative discussion to take them down the road a bit. You want people coming to the meeting inspired by the agenda."

Decide what topics board should focus on: "People go where you lead them. The board should not be talking about where the conference should be! Tactical stuff I never bring to the board."

Plan what insight to bring them: "It's the CEO's job is to feed them. It's like they are running a marathon. You have to give them the fuel they need to do the governance work. You have to give them relevant perspective."

Think about how to use their time wisely: "It's not my job to make board meetings comfortable for the board. It doesn't have to be painful. But it's got to be a stretch. If it's not a stretch they can do email and tune out."

Strategize how to meter out the information/conversation: "You give them a little bit. You let them think about it. When they are ready you feed them some more."

QUALITIES *of an* EFFECTIVE BOARD

▶ According to respondents, to be an effective board, board members must be:

- **Trusting** of their **CEO** and **staff** (weighted average of 4.47 out of 5)
- **Ethical** (weighted average of 4.37 out of 5)
- **Supportive** of the **CEO** (weighted average of 4.34 out of 5)
- **Focused** on **advancing** the **industry**, their **profession**, and the **overall mission** of the association (weighted average of 4.33 out of 5)
- **Engaged** (weighted average of 4.33 out of 5)

“A high-functioning board relies on a high-functioning executive. There has to be the trust and confidence in the executive. And when they don’t trust that they may get mired in how we do things.”

Defining an “Engaged” Board Being Prepared

Board members know their role, take it seriously, read and respond to board communications in a timely manner, and prepare for and participate in meetings. They offer ideas and opinions, ask questions, give their time and energy, and aren’t just building their resume.

Being Responsive to Membership

Being an engaged board member goes beyond reading the materials and being prepared to participate in conversations; it also means that board members must be willing to listen, learn, and respond to the voices of the membership. They actively go out and talk to members of the organization on a regular basis to find out what issues they are most concerned with. This information comes back to the board for discussion and factors into the dynamic nature of the organization’s strategic plan.

Being Involved

Understanding what is going on with the membership, important industry issues, getting involved with committees, etc. One that is focused “out” on strategy and not “down” on operations and is having data-informed conversations. Someone who not only offers ideas, but helps to implement those ideas.

According to one respondent*: “Currently, I have the most effective board that I’ve worked with. The board president has a deep contact list of companies, individuals, and key community members to help the association in a variety of ways. Many don’t like to say no to her. She demands the respect of key influencers, which makes our job a little easier. She is also focused on strategy and process. Having leaders who are visionaries is essential. Also having someone with institutional knowledge is important.”

Respondent is from a chapter/regional based organization in the United States with annual revenue between \$250,000 - \$499,999. They have worked in the association and/or non-profit industry for 11-15 years.

Being Committed

They are committed to the effort, take pride of ownership, follow through on their work, are willing to mentor new board members, and check their egos at the door. They can articulate the mission, vision, and core values through their own narrative and advocate for the association in an authentic way.

Effective Board Outcomes

When effective boards are assembled, the top outcomes are as follows:

- **More interest in volunteering** (73.86%)
- The **profile** of the **association improves** or grows in the **industry** (73.86%)
- **Committees** and **task forces** reach their **goals** (69.32%)

QUALITIES *of an* EFFECTIVE BOARD

Other Outcomes

- New research and standards are created
- Legislation and federal policies are developed
- New programs are developed
- New technology is used and or created as an industry standard
- Membership grows and is more engaged
- New member segments and dues models are implemented
- Knowing when to let go of legacy products in order to free up time and money
- Strategic governance and alignment is introduced

Examples of Effective Board Outcomes Technology

“By being engaged in the trends of our industry, our board’s early adoption (and constant advocacy and support) of a crucial new ‘game-changing’ technology, sustained a national movement that resulted in the adoption of this technology across a competing industry and is now accessible throughout the general population of the United States.” *Respondent is from a Chapter/Regional based Trade Association in the Journalism & News/Media & Broadcasting/Publishing Industry with annual revenue between \$500,000 – \$999,999. They have worked in the association and/or non-profit industry for 6-10 years.*

Strategic Governance and Alignment

“Our membership base is shrinking rapidly. Through effective board involvement we were able to revise our bylaws and shrink the size of the board. In doing this we also were able to reassign committee duties and make the organization more effective.” *Respondent is from a Statewide Trade Association in the Accounting/Banking/Financial Services industry with annual revenue between \$1,000,000 – \$2,999,999. They have worked in the association and/or non-profit industry for 16-20 years.*

New Programs

“In my third year as CEO, after some of the governance and leadership changes I brought had time to transition through, my board was at its best. It was engaged, willing to take risks, made data-driven decisions, and trusted the CEO. We were able to launch multiple new strategies, programs, and member benefits during a few short years, which catapulted the association into success.” *Respondent is from a National Trade Association in the wholesale distribution industry with annual revenue between \$1,000,000 – \$2,999,999. They have worked in the association and/or non-profit industry for 16-20 years.*

New Member Dues Model

“In 2008, I wanted the association to consider a new dues model and member value proposition. It would be a departure from the old method (charge based on size of business) to charge based on benefits package. Because of the fiscal impact this could have, the board was very good about reviewing our due-diligence process and deliberating in person the pros and cons. Everyone participated in the discussion, and it resulted in a new way of doing business, which ultimately allowed our association to survive (and thrive) during the recession.” *Respondent is from a US based trade association in the sports industry with annual revenue between \$3,000,000 – \$5,999,999. They have worked in the association and/or non-profit industry for 16-20 years.*

Knowing When to Let Go of Legacy Products

“The board needed to decide as to whether to maintain management of the industry trade show, or give up the show and receive an endorsement fee from a competing show. The board made the decision to get out of the show business, which freed up resources to address regulatory and legislative issues.”

DATA

▶ **M**ore than **78.41 percent** of respondents believed that **bringing too much data to a board meeting can be ineffective.**

Too much data can lead to “analysis paralysis” for many boards. Providing relevant data without overloading them will help the board make informed decisions and prevent them from getting stuck digging through data points.

The majority of respondents indicated that it is important to send just enough data in advance of the meeting so boards don’t get overwhelmed and get “deep into the weeds.” Part of the job for an association leader is to gather and evaluate data, and then disseminate the relevant data to facilitate informed decision-making. Association leaders need to be able to analyze and distill salient material for the board so as to use their collective time and reasoning efficiently and effectively.

“Data doesn’t have to be quantitative...High-performing boards don’t assume that every piece of knowledge is held by those on the board. They reach out to others.”

BOARD CHAIR

▶ **Board Chair and Association Leader Relationship**

The relationship between the board chair and the CEO shifts with each new board chair. New personalities, new needs, and new problems to solve mean the CEO has to be flexible with their communication and leadership style. Every one or two years CEOs are learning what their new boss needs, how to communicate best with them and are working again to gain trust from that individual.

Having a great relationship with the board chair is one of the key goals of association CEOs because this can lead to great outcomes, however this is often a challenge. Many CEOs note that they set the stage by bringing the incoming board chair to an industry event, such as the **ASAE Executive Leadership Forum.**

When an association has a high-functioning board, the relationship between the board chair and the association’s CEO is strong. **More than 43.18 percent agreed that the board is co-led by the board chair and the association’s CEO.** Only 13.64 percent thought the association’s CEO could lead a highly functional board alone and only 15.91 percent thought the board chair could lead a highly functional board alone.

Traits of an Effective Board Chair

Effective and high-performing board chairs are active and engaged. According to respondents, they understand the hot topics in the profession and industry and partner with the CEO to make sure these key topics are part of the board’s agenda. They take an active role in mentoring the committees so the committees achieve their goals. They actively police the board’s conversation so the conversation doesn’t slip into the more comfortable operational issues. They, too, set expectations with the board and are in a key position to nurture the board’s culture.

BOARD CHAIR

Ideally, the high-performing chair will partner with a CEO who has proven they are credible. When this is the case, high-performing chairs don't micromanage the CEO and instead partner with the CEO in determining the right issues for the board to talk about. There is not a personal agenda and they remain strategic.

Common themes from respondents on the effectiveness of a board chair:

Focused and Supportive

An engaged board chair supports the CEO and also assists in making decisions so that initiatives can move forward. They inspire the rest of the group to action and keep them on task.

A Good Member

A good chair is one who has been a good member. They are vetted and respected; they know how to serve, support, and lead.

The Consequences of a Low-Functioning Board:

Staff turnover (voluntary or involuntary) and staff dissatisfaction: "There's a lot of discontent among the staff. I want to come to work and do my job I don't want to come to work and take orders from two bosses. Great staff members with a great staff culture want to work on strategic new things. When the board is not making decisions there is no new and interesting work. We all want some strategic work to do. Who wants to just do renewals all the time?" Also, "Sometimes volunteer leaders don't know how much staff cares about their job. So the scapegoating will go around and around and ultimately they will point their fingers at the staff. So the great people will leave. Great people can go anywhere."

Financial trouble: Low-functioning boards impact the financial picture for associations. "It took nearly a decade but the association is now imploding."

Decisions are not made or bad decisions are made: "It impacts you with programs, events, professional development, or special initiatives. If you don't have a cohesive board, you don't have champions and things won't get done." And, "If you are not making good decisions, you are not making good outcomes."

Membership will decline: CEOs come at this from a few different vantage points. "You disenfranchise those core members who ultimately you are responsible for, these core members are your reason for being. What happens at the top trickles down to the membership. They feel it when the culture is off. The board keeps making decisions to serve peripheral segments. The core members didn't get the value they deserve. They may not be able to point the finger to exactly what happened, they just know you've lost touch."

BOARD MEMBER RECRUITMENT and SELECTION

▶ **C**EOs are becoming more involved with board recruitment. They know which committee leaders are likely to make strong board members. CEOs take the lead in board orientation which helps members understand the role of the board (vs. the role of the staff), their goals and what they can expect. The CEO sets expectations, determines the tone, and cultivates, to some degree, the board culture.

More than **56 percent** of responding CEOs were involved in board member recruitment and selection.

From an association leader's point of view, association leaders bring many benefits to the board member recruitment and selection process, including:

- **Knowing which members are active**
- Helping association leaders **feel more involved** in the **guiding, not deciding,** process
- Knowing **member skill sets**
- **Integrity** in the overall process
- Helping to **establish** the **candidate criteria,** providing input into the **special skills** or **perspectives** the **board composition needs**
- Keeping focus on **organizational vision**

Oftentimes, when association leaders are not involved in the recruitment and selection process, less qualified or engaged people are elected.

TRAITS of a LOW-FUNCTIONING BOARD

▶ **T**he top two traits of a low-functioning board, according to respondents, are:

- Board members **are not strategic** and are **“in the weeds”** (4.12 weighted average on a scale of 1 to 5)
- Board members **don't understand their role** and **what they are responsible** for (3.94 weighted average on a scale of 1 to 5)

According to the survey results, the number of members on a board does not correlate with level of functionality. However, respondents felt that more **than 16 board members** are **“too many.”** One respondent suggested that the number of board members should be proportional to the size of the membership.

STRATEGIES USED *by* ASSOCIATION LEADERS to HELP BOARDS *be* SUCCESSFUL

▶ **T**here were three main themes that were derived from the data to help boards be successful.

Focusing on Communications

- Providing clear and unbiased information for their decision making. It is important to equally present pros and cons.
- Providing ongoing communications to highlight industry developments and trends, and to seek input on agenda items.

Conducting a Board Orientation or “Annual Governance Workshop”

- Conducting an orientation to explain board duties, policies and procedures, and the organization’s model of governance. One respondent referred to it as an “annual governance workshop” for incoming and returning board members. Orientations are sometimes looked as a list of responsibilities with no real understanding of the “why, what, and how.” Conversely, a governance workshop focuses on illustrating in real-time the fiduciary and governance

responsibilities of a non-profit board so members understand the expectations and their role.

- Providing education about effective boards and association management best practices, such as committee structures, strategic planning, and meeting planning through ASAE training programs.
- Having as many one-on-one meetings with individual board members as needed to gain personal insights and better understand the industry and issues important to them.

Setting Expectations and Focusing on Strategic Discussions

- Providing clear expectations of what they should contribute as board members.
- Reminding them that they are the leaders of the industry/profession and keeping them focused at the strategic level.
- Providing reminders to put themselves in the shoes of the members when making decisions for the organization.

Do you want to know more about this study or interested in performing a research project for your organization?

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