

ASSE Governance: Focused Volunteerism Proposed Restructure Will Improve Member Experience

Unlike a for-profit business, a professional membership association like ASSE faces this unique proposition: members as owners, customers and workforce. That's a lot of hats to wear, and perhaps none is more important to ASSE's success than the volunteers who make up the workforce component of this equation.

In today's fast-paced world, however, it's a challenge to strike a balance between work, family and profession. Recognizing this fact, ASSE's Board of Directors (BOD) decided in 2010 to assess the Society's governance structure. Through an iterative, open process, the BOD gathered input from members across the Society, spoke with current and former leaders, and sought counsel from recognized association management experts. The goal was to examine the current environment in which ASSE and its members operate, and to gain a better understanding of member needs, especially their expectations in terms of volunteer opportunities, and how they wish to engage with ASSE.

Based on the findings, the BOD identified the need for several changes, and a diverse member task force drafted a governance model that was subsequently revised based on member feedback. The proposed model and its associated changes have been discussed across the Society through *Professional Safety* articles, webinars, and discussions at chapter and regional operating committee meetings. This information is also posted at www.asse.org/restructure.

An RVP's Perspective on the Changes

Among the changes proposed is the removal of regional and council vice presidents from the BOD. Under the current model, these volunteer leaders fill dual roles: one focused on operational issues, one devoted to strategic concerns. This approach creates a unique perspective but can lead to overload, says Region VIII Vice President Eric Stager, CSP, CIH.

"On the chapter side [operational role], I get to see the direct improvement in a chapter or see where things are going, and I get to interact with people. It's also a great way for volunteer leaders to learn a variety of soft skills." At the board level (strategic role), Stager says that seeing where the Society and profession are moving is rewarding as well.

That said, the dual role also requires a significant commitment of time that can lead to frustration for the various vice presidents and the groups they represent. "For example, as an RVP [regional vice president], I support 20 chapters in the northeast," Stager explains. "In that role, I need to visit chapters, work with them on administrative issues, field phone calls and help solve problems." Fewer and fewer volunteers can make that commitment, Stager says, adding that even fewer employers today support that level of volunteerism.

According to Stager, the proposed model would allow region and council vice presidents to focus on operational issues, a change that will benefit all members. "More focused volunteerism will better support the member experience," he says.

Stager also notes that under the proposed structure, the RVPs would have a dedicated vice president through the Council on Region Affairs (CORA). This person would serve a 2-year term and could be elected to a second 2-year term.

Under the current structure, the Council on Member and Region Affairs (COMRA) reports to the senior vice president, who only fills that office for 1 year. "This change will create more stability from a volunteer standpoint and allow us to be better able to move things forward." It will also create better accountability and responsiveness, Stager explains.

In addition, the proposed changes move operational decision making to the council and region levels, which should improve efficiencies, as Stager illustrates with this scenario. "Suppose CORA deems it necessary to make more regions or to make an RVP responsible for fewer chapters. Under the proposed model, that group would make that decision and implement those changes. Under our current model, such an action would require a bylaws change."

Stager believes the new model will create opportunities to involve more members as well, and he offers this example. "As an RVP, I'm no longer sitting both on COMRA and on the board of directors," he explains. "Instead, there would be four at-large directors sitting on the board, which allows ASSE to spread some of that volunteer time among multiple people, to reduce the volunteer workload per person."

The addition of a public director is another positive, Stager says. "This industry leader will provide a new perspective on promoting the profession to our key stakeholder groups."

In addition, the changes will allow members to volunteer in ways that appeal more to their individual passions and abilities. Stager believes that allowing members more options for how they engage with ASSE will make the Society stronger. As he explains, the proposed structure creates new pathways for involvement. "We are putting four new members on the board to help steer the Society, and they may be better equipped to do so. We would go from a working board to an oversight board. And, we'd be allowing folks who do well in their councils to run them operationally, make those groups better and improve the member experience."

That improved experience will help the Society retain more members and attract new members, Stager believes, both of which are vital to growing ASSE and expanding its influence. Larger membership means a larger voice, he says. "When we have a larger membership we can do more to move the profession forward. With the larger membership, we would, for example, be better able to promote the profession and move projects forward that show the value of the profession."

Stager also refutes the notion that if nothing's broken, why change. "When I hear that argument, I use the analogy of Polaroid. Polaroid had the first digital camera and its board said, 'We're making money hand over fist. Who is going to buy a digital camera?' Well, I watched them demolish Polaroid headquarters last year. So, I guess my strategic viewpoint is that if we can tweak a good thing and make it better, then that's what we have to do."

Members will also be better represented at the BOD level under the proposed structure, Stager says. "As a member of a given region, you currently vote for 8 out of 15 members of the board. In the new format, you will vote for 8 out of 8 members of the board. That's more direct representation for members."

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Eric Stager
Region VIII RVP