

## Association Governance

### An Ongoing Evolution to Deliver Value

Change is rarely a comfortable idea, particularly when things are going well and most indicators point to continued success. But, as James Belasco and Ralph Stayer say in *Flight of the Buffalo*, “Change is hard because people overestimate the value of what they have—and underestimate the value of what they may gain by giving that up.”

When ASSE’s Board of Directors (BOD) began to examine the need to modify ASSE’s governance structure in 2010, the Society was experiencing membership growth, its annual conference was expanding and other successes were being recorded as the Society approached its 100th anniversary. Yet, the BOD sensed that meaningful change was needed to help ASSE prosper and advance the profession well into the future.

Using an iterative, collaborative process, the BOD enlisted various member constituent groups and Glenn Tecker, a governance expert, to examine trends, review current and expected member demographics, discuss business factors and understand best practices in association governance. Based on the discussions and dialogue, the BOD determined that being proactive in changing the Society’s governance model would enable ASSE to maximize its resources, create more volunteer and leadership opportunities, increase diversity and bring new voices to the decision-making process.

#### Current Trends & Governance Evolution

Recognizing the need to create a more flexible, efficient and effective organization was reflective of the governance experiences of other professional membership organizations. In *The Will to Govern Well*, Tecker and colleagues identify several current trends in association governance that were used to draft ASSE’s proposed governance model.

- Boards have become smaller to accommodate quicker decision making. But, this doesn’t mean fewer people are involved in the process, say Tecker and colleagues. “Many associations make every level of decision making smaller, not larger, and have been able to do it without sacrificing participation. By using a variety of technologies, they have allowed a broader group of members to engage in deliberations.”

- More organizations are moving away from geographic/constituency representation on boards toward a leadership selection process that is focused on the skills and experiences needed to make effective decisions. In fact, “value to members” is becoming a driving force behind board composition, according to Tecker and colleagues. This evolution is also reflective of the fact that more members now engage and participate based much less on where they live and much more on what they do and their specific knowledge needs.

- Houses of delegates are being engaged as key sources of industry and professional practice information and insight.

- Associations are spending more time discussing and shaping the future of the industry, profession or cause they serve. Berit Lakey, a governance consultant with BoardSource, says, “Boards should keep a future-perspective when making decision. [They] must always keep an eye out for changes in the environment that may represent challenges or opportunities.” Lakey adds that many association boards are recognizing the value of give-and-take discussions that present opportunities to explore pros and cons of ideas and proposals. This promotes what Lakey calls a *culture of inquiry*.

In addition, associations are recognizing the need to iden-

#### A Changed ASSE

- ASSE membership has grown by more than 15% since 1995, and the number of ASSE’s practice specialties has grown 112.5%.
- In 1995, the practice specialties produced fewer than 200 pages of content. In 2012, these groups generated nearly 3,600 pages of technical content.
- The number of ASSE members who belong to at least one practice specialty has grown by 34.7% since 1995.
- Common interest groups (CIGs) did not exist before Women in Safety Engineering was formed in 2003. Today, more than 5,100 members belong to ASSE’s four CIGs.

#### Key Differences in the Proposed Model

- Decrease BOD from 16 to 10 members.
- Add a public director.
- Elect 8 BOD members Society-wide.
- Expand regions (anticipated) for additional chapter support.

tify future leaders sooner and nurture their development. According to GinCommGroup, “Nominating committees are becoming ‘leadership development committees.’ These committees have the responsibility to identify and nurture future leaders.” This is especially important today given the fact that there is strong competition for good board members because time is scarce, Lakey explains.

This trend also relates to member expectations and needs regarding the time commitment involved involunteering. “Successful associations . . . are reshaping the nature of the work they offer members to meet the realities of their lives and the time they have to give,” Tecker and colleagues explain. “Work is being broken down into smaller time commitments. . . . Volunteers are expecting the work to be focused, flexible, fast and fun.”

Many organizations are also finding ways to bring in outside perspectives by way of adding public members to their boards. Consider the experience of American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), which added its first public member (and nonphysician) in 1992. David Noonan, a since-retired senior staff leader for AAO, says, “The inside ‘outsider’ keeps you looking at the big picture. . . . Public members help keep you from taking everything too seriously. They do tend to see the forest and the tree.”

ASSE continues to field member questions and gather member input regarding the proposed model. The Society has a website (<http://restructure2013.asse.org>) that houses audio recordings and slide presentations from two webinars on the proposed model, articles from *PS* and FAQs. The site also features a feedback form where members can post questions. Visit the website to learn more about this initiative and share your feedback.

#### References

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