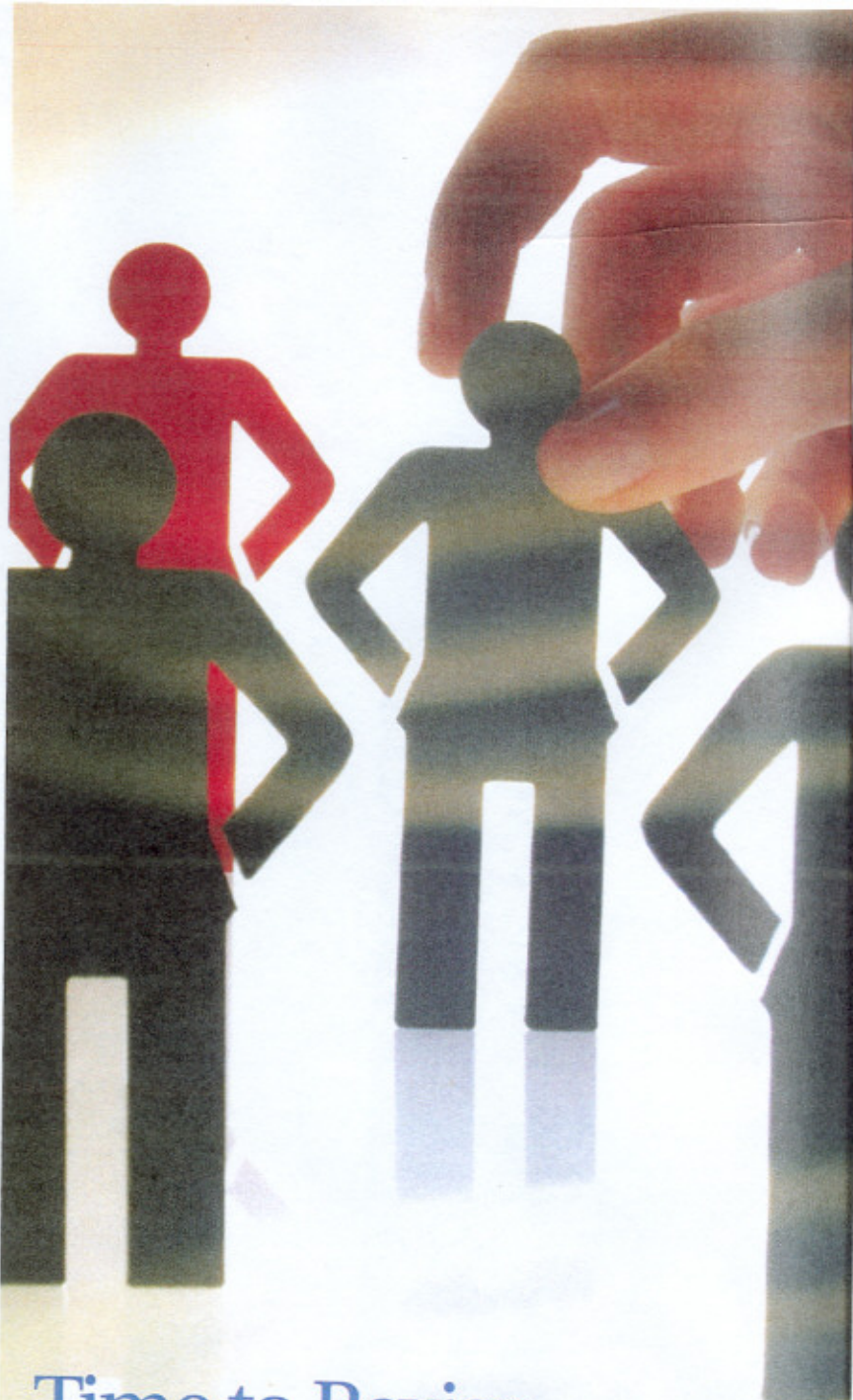


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A large, close-up photograph of a hand placing a black paper cutout of a person onto a line of other cutouts. The line includes a red cutout and several black ones. The cutouts are standing on a light-colored surface. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white.

An association's
board nominations
and elections
process says a lot
about the values
of its leaders.

Time to Revise Officer Elections?

diana.foster

122 : diana.foster

Date: 7/19/2007

An executive director believes that her association has outgrown the election process that served it so well in the early days. But what process will ensure the election of strategic thinkers who represent the membership, and how can she persuade the board to adopt it?

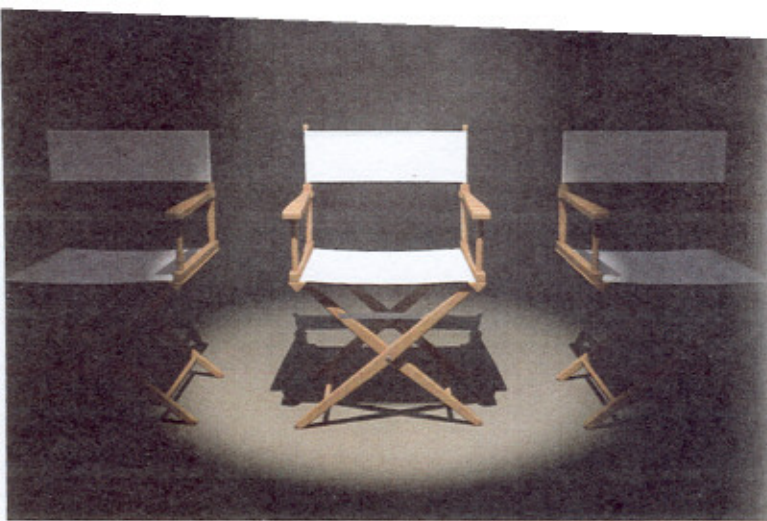
By Nancy Green, CAE

What happens when the long-time leaders of an association won't let go of an elections process created when the field was just coalescing and the association was small and struggling? How can a relative newcomer bring about badly needed change in the organization's culture while honoring its rich history and the passion of its most invested advocates?

An association's board nominations and elections process often provides insights into its history and the values of its leaders. Over time, it can also lead an organization to thrive or decline. Sarah Granger, executive director of the National Association for Avian Education Enthusiasts, knows this only too well. In a two-year-long effort to streamline and update the governance structure, she has run into a particularly difficult roadblock: the tightly controlled elections process.

The National Association for Avian Education Enthusiasts got its start in the home of its most passionate advocate. After incorporating in the state of Indiana and receiving its 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, this public education organization conducted its work from a volunteer's kitchen table for the first 15 years of its existence.

Through these early years, resources were scarce. The association had no money to pay professional staff. Instead, the growing board of directors accomplished the work of the organization, and the association's governance rules were designed to ensure that most of the people who had an investment in the organization's success also had a seat at the governing table. Criteria for board participation also favored leaders who had considerable name recognition and credibility in the academic research community. General elections typically featured slates of high-profile candidates. In the lean years, the big names on the board served as spokespersons and advocates and helped raise the profile of this fledgling organization.



Today, now that NAAEE is well established, has eight paid staff members, and offers a broad array of member benefits and services, the association sorely needs a more diverse and sophisticated set of perspectives at the board table. Sarah clearly sees that the board nomination and elections process, which served its purpose in the early days, is nothing more than a popularity contest. With a growing membership and diverse revenue streams to support the organization, the critical role of the board has clearly evolved. Sarah's concerns grow as she makes the following observations.

Name recognition earns votes. Only leaders who have been published in multiple research journals and authored textbooks receive enough votes to earn an at-large, three-year term on the board in this democratically conducted membership vote. Time after time, leaders with other equally valuable qualifications—not to mention fresh perspectives and skills—consistently lose out to the most prolific authors and editors.

The nominating committee chooses cronies. The president handpicks a small group of current board members and instructs them to create the slate of candidates for the board. The practice ensures contested elections, but the nominations committee looks no further for candidates than the tightly knit group of academics with whom they are familiar.

The eligibility criteria promote homogeneity. With criteria for board eligibility focused largely on public accomplishments rather than skills, board members not only emerge from similar academic backgrounds but also share a perspective based on age, socioeconomic status, and experience. Diversity at any level is absent.

Some member groups are underrepresented. The general membership of the National Association for Avian Education Enthusiasts mostly comprises classroom teachers and parents, but board members come largely from the academic community. On the board, a we-know-what's-best-for-the-members mentality prevails. Data-driven decision making is largely absent in this climate.

Parochial views limit strategic thinking. With strong feelings of ownership for the organization, insider leaders are reluctant to invite other voices to

: table to build alliances and seek a broader perspective. They just don't
: the value in it. And they seldom cultivate other board skills.

Predictably, this approach to governing is taking its toll on NAAEE. Potential new leaders feel increasingly disenfranchised. The lack of diversity on the board has fostered ego struggles and plain vanilla decision making. Risk taking is rare. Opportunities for collaboration and growth are missed, key stakeholder perspectives are left out of the mix. The skills required to facilitate a governing rather than operational board are not honored and appreciated, as the values of the current group self-perpetuate.

Sarah needs to make a case for change to the people who have the most to lose from it. How can she honor the contributions of prominent leaders while basically asking some of these same people to step aside? What nominations and elections structure will ensure that the most qualified leaders are invited to the table and encouraged to think strategically about the organization's future growth and success?

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Response 1

By Patrick Jones

Like many management case studies, this one presents a stark contrast between what is and what could be. This case seems to cry out, "Stodgy, backward board blocks valiant efforts of heroic executive director riding white charger." I'm sure many executive directors feel this way from time to time. But the reality of an association's transition from an all-volunteer organization to one managed by professional staff is perhaps less severe than this example suggests.

Indeed, the case itself presents evidence that the board is not nearly as risk-averse or backward as the executive director may believe. We learn, for instance, that "NAAEE is well established, has eight paid staff members, and offers a broad array of member benefits and services." The board must have been doing something right to allow that to happen.

Nonetheless, the case presents ample evidence that there is a lack of diversity in experience, skills, and perspective on the board, which is cause enough to be concerned about the strategic direction of the association. So what advice can we give our executive director, Sarah Granger?

Focus on strategy. The evidence seems to point us in the direction of changing the nominating process. But the nominating process is merely a symptom of a larger problem. What's really at stake here is vision and strategy. Sarah Granger needs to engage the board in a discussion about its vision for the association and the profession it represents. Where does the

association want to be in 10 years? What changes are likely to happen in the field of avian education in that time? What good does the association wish to accomplish, for what group of people, and at what cost? What kind of board do we need to achieve that vision? Those are critical conversations Granger needs to have with her board. She needs to try to be a catalyst for those discussions. Contrary to the statement in the case study that "Granger badly needs to make a case for change from the very people who have the most to lose from it," Sarah needs to gently lead the board to a point where they can see how much they have to gain by focusing on the association's vision. After exploring and eventually embracing a new and compelling vision for the future, the board will begin to see the value in expanding its ranks to include greater diversity in experience, skills, and perspective. Make the vision and strategy drive changes in the nominating process, not the other way around.

Use data to educate the board. If the board is as out of touch with the needs of the membership as Granger suspects, then reliable data is one way to help convince the board and nominating committee to change their ways. She should conduct a robust member needs assessment and member satisfaction survey to find out what aspects of belonging to NAAEE are most valuable to the members and what brings them the most satisfaction. Using this information, she should perform an opportunity analysis to determine where the members most want to see improvements in the value they receive. She should ask the members how they feel about the responsiveness of volunteer leaders in representing and advancing their interests. Talk to the members. Find out what they want. Engage them in the visioning and strategy process, either by including them in the board's strategy process or by eliciting their views from the needs assessment and satisfaction surveys. There are many ways to show gaps between member interests and board actions and attitudes. The board might ignore this kind of data for a time. But after a steady downpour of data like this, the leaky roof must be repaired, or replaced.

Leverage the familiar. Boards like to see how new decisions relate to past actions. This association obviously has a strong history of volunteer activism. But the board also has made some significant changes over the years. Moving from conducting its work from a volunteer's kitchen for 15 years to having eight professional staff suggests the board has some capacity to embrace change. Sarah should leverage that history and those past decisions to help the board embrace even more dramatic changes. "Remember what it was like to hire your first full-time staff person?" Sarah could ask the board. "What did that feel like? What information, challenges, opportunities, or thinking contributed to that decision? What circumstances in our profession today might cause you to consider further change?" Sarah can become a catalyst for the board's discussions about future vision and strategy. And the board can feel comfortable thinking about new

ways of doing things because of their past successes in embracing change.

Without a doubt, Sarah has a big job on her hands. But she should not be without hope. She needs to engage the board in visioning the future, using reliable data, and by reminding them of their connection to earlier dramatic decisions that now feel comfortable.

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Response 2

By M. Cass Wheeler

Several options, both short- and long-term, are available to Sarah Granger as she addresses the problem of the outdated election process at NAAEE. Her approach should be data driven and rational to minimize the possibility of this becoming an emotional issue. In other words, the mission and purpose of the organization should drive the reasons for change. By the sound of the situation, this justification won't be difficult to make.

The challenge is taking the concepts and developing an execution strategy. Let's first look at this challenge within the broadest framework of the organization. Does the organization have a bold strategic goal? Does the organization have a strategic plan to support achievement of the goal? If so, what are the functions and competencies that must be in place to be successful?

For example, in 1998 the American Heart Association adopted a goal to reduce coronary heart disease, stroke, and risk by 25 percent by 2010. To reach that impact goal, the organization identified the following functions and competencies that must be in place to be successful: discovery and translation of science; advocacy; health care delivery; marketing and communications; new resources; and corporate operations. With these functions and competencies and a commitment from our leadership to build the highest competencies in these six areas, we can now move to processes to drive the business in each.

If NAAEE clearly articulates the functions of the organization and what it wants to be in the future, this first step will make visible the need for transformational change in the decision-making processes of the organization, the need for diverse representation, and the need to have a clear delineation between the role of the board and the role of the staff. The board of directors will see that it has to be balanced and represent all competencies to enable the organization to implement the strategic plan and achieve its bold goal.

In the American Heart Association, these competencies are clearly outlined on the board nomination form. Each applicant must state which competency he or she best meets and why. The nominating committee is

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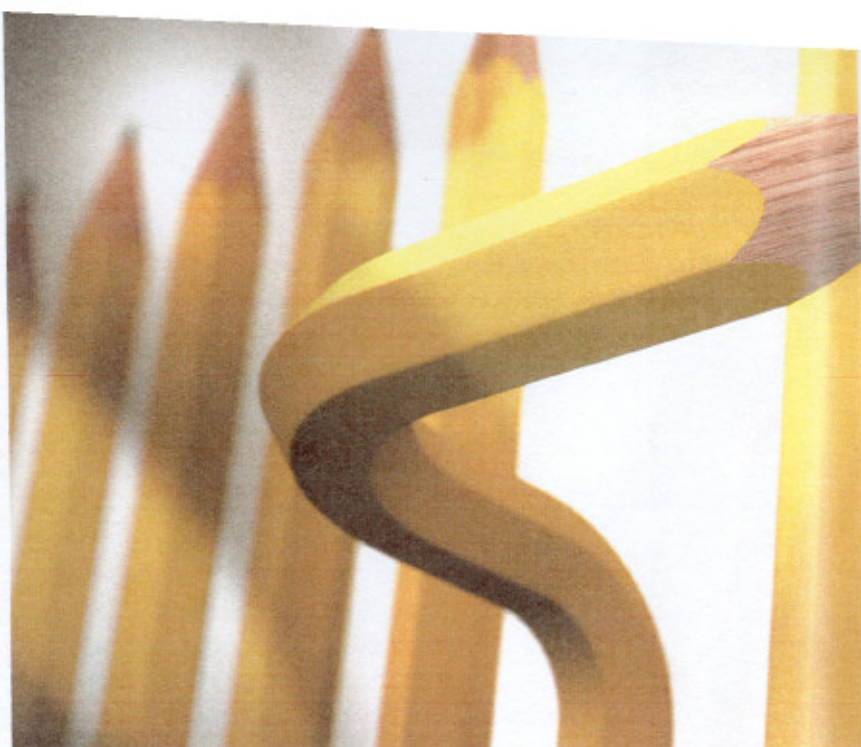
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then responsible for presenting a balanced slate of nominees. The process functions much like a National Football League draft. The committee analyzes the existing board competencies and, with the open positions, attempts to begin balancing the board. Continuing the NFL analogy, you don't want to have all quarterbacks on the team with no one to block or receive the ball. A regular board self-assessment, if not used to the exclusion of other strategies, might also be an approach that can create an environment where the discussion of current and future skill sets is acceptable.

A short-term approach to moving to the next step is to appoint a task force of the board to address the issue of governance and the kind of board that is needed and to clarify the roles of the board and the staff. The task force should look at sector best practices and make recommendations to the board. An outside facilitator from a group such as BoardSource could be brought in to consult or provide data to the task force on best practices including board size and term limits. In the case of NAAEE, an outside facilitator could be valuable. The task force, with the help of the outside facilitator, could make recommendations to the existing board.

In my experience, when the approach leads to identifying the competencies that must be in place in order to achieve the organization's strategic plan, the board, the membership, and the staff are motivated and eager to be a part of what is best for the organization.

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Response 3

By Mark R. Ginsberg, Ph.D.

Change is hard yet necessary. The call for change often is associated with voices that seek development. Such seems to be the case for the National Association for Avian Education Enthusiasts. The context of an association is special in many ways. As association theorists have pointed out, association members are frequently owners, workers, and consumers concurrently. For many years this has been a part of the NAAEE context, and remains an organizational tradition if not a current organization function. The centrality of the association member triad of roles and responsibilities (owner, member, and worker) is most complicated when considering change to the process of the election for association leadership positions.

The NAAEE is not unique. In fact, the situation that the NAAEE finds itself in is familiar territory to many organizations that have grown from small, member-managed organizations to become large, diverse, representative associations managed by experienced professional staff. Managing the process of organizational change and creating a climate for shared contribution to the change process among multiple institutional stakeholders are key ingredients for success in the transformation from the what NAAEE has been to what it wants, and likely needs, to become.

The nominations and elections process, central in its importance as a structure for an association, also is representative of the culture of the association. How the association organizes its search for and selection of new members of its governance structure is paramount to how well the



governance functions, as Al Rickard pointed out in the January 2007 volunteer leadership issue supplement to *Associations Now*^P. He noted that, in his organization, long-term service had been a primary criterion for selection for board service when the organization needed a better way to select leaders and a better link between "market trends and strategic issues." This seems like a logical, sensible principle, selecting the best fit between organizational need and the professional experience and personal assets that prospective leaders can bring to a board.

Yet many associations conduct their board nominations and elections process the way it always has been done rather than in a way that makes the most sense for the association. When Jim Collins talks about "getting the right people on the bus" as an important function of organizational leadership, his principle also must relate to the selection of members of the organization's governance. NAAEE is in a difficult, if not unusual, position. For many years, the right people may have been on the bus, but in the future the bus will be a different vehicle and it will take new roads to new destinations. Clearly, something has to change.

My advice to Sarah Granger, the executive director of NAAEE, is to consider the challenge of change as a sequence of many smaller organizational enhancements that can be made over time. It is essential that the historical figures in the field, and the founding leaders of the association, remain committed to the organization. Alienating the founders and historical leaders could be cataclysmic. It also will be dangerous not to involve newer and younger members, and all of the segments of the membership that well represent the rank-and-file constituencies of the NAAEE. In short, all must be included, none can be marginalized, and patience needs to prevail as a change process begins and unfolds.

It would be useful to consider a set of transition elements that will allow for an orderly movement from what has been to what could be, at least in terms of the nominations and elections process. Of course, what really is at stake is organizational change, not merely a microchange in the nominations and elections structure. The services of an experienced consultant could enhance the change process and ensure that different perspectives are included and heard. This also may allow for subtle (at first) and perhaps ultimately more dramatic (and meaningful) changes in the programmatic components of the NAAEE. In time, the overarching goal would be for the board to lead and govern and the staff to lead and manage, a collaboration that will result in significant overall organizational change.

The first element that might start a change process would be to institute an association-wide planning exercise. An "NAAEE for the Future" activity could provide a forum for past, present, and future leaders to gather and discuss the critical issues for the organization. Certainly, such a group's consideration must include both a review of the programmatic elements of the association as well as the structure and function of governance. A broad charge to a study group could allow creative consideration of the new and possible, with respect for the past. It also could provide an opportunity for review and study, as well as dialog and deliberation, about contemporary association governance models, such as governance as leadership,² knowledge-based strategic governance,³ policy governance, and other governance models. NAAEE can consider adapting what is best for the NAAEE instead of simply adopting what others have suggested in the past.

Opening the vista of organizational opportunity can lead to discussions about organizational change. Yes, there will be resistance, yet a skilled facilitator, a broadly representative group, and a commitment to open dialog will create a space for dreaming. It is the dream of what can be, informed with respect for what has been, that will allow for early success and the sowing of the seeds of change.

A structure that also might be useful to consider would be the creation of a council of leaders to advise the change process. The council should be an inclusive organizational array of leaders. When the Khaleel Jamison Group posited that the highest performing organizations are those organizations that are most inclusive (the model identified as high performing inclusive organization, or HPIO), they implied that providing a seat at the leadership table and welcoming a diverse community to the association is essential for organizational success.⁵ Inclusivity needs to be proffered not only because it is the right thing to do, which it is, but also because without inclusivity it is impossible to achieve genuine organizational success. Once the decision is made to create a climate for inclusivity, there is no turning back, and the change process will flow forward. Inclusivity is not easy to achieve; doing so will take months, if not years. But it will

ensure success. Just as a successful diet changes how one eats not for a week but for the rest of one's life, inclusivity requires a fundamental change in organizational culture, not merely practices.

The structural changes will be easy, compared to the cultural shift that will allow structural changes to occur. Surely, creating a nomination and elections structure that selects members for leadership positions based on organizational needs and professional characteristics is necessary in today's association. However, getting to that point requires the kind of hard process work that will lead to lasting and meaningful organizational change. NAAEE is asking the right questions, and Sarah seems like the right person to help build the momentum for change. She needs to partner with the leaders of the past, the historical figures in the field, as well as the emerging communities of interest and organizational stakeholders. Can it be done? Of course. Should it be done? Of course. If the process of change does not occur, in three to five years, members of the former NAAEE will be asking "What happened to our organization?" not because it is different but because it no longer is there.

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Notes

¹Al Rickard, "The Right Board, Right Now" *Associations Now*, Volunteer Leadership insert (January 2007).

²Richard Chait, William Ryan, and Barbara Taylor, *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Works of Nonprofit Boards* (Hoboken, New Jersey: 2005).

³Foundation of the ASAE, *The Will to Govern Well: Knowledge, Trust and Nimbleness*, by Glenn Tecker, Jean Frankel, and Paul Meyer (Washington, D.C.: 2002).

⁴John Carver, *Boards That Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

⁵The Kaleel Jamison Group, "Making High Performance through Building Inclusion and Leveraging Diversity a Way of Life," by Frederick Miller and Judith Katz, Link&Learn eNewsletter (May 2006), www.linkageinc.com/company/news_events/link_learn_enewsletter/archive/2006/05_06_Article_Making_high_performance.aspx, February 4, 2007.