



**N**ot too long ago, a fairly new CEO asked me to address his board of directors and volunteer leaders at the association's Leadership Conference — in all, a group of approximately 250 people. He wanted me to focus on how I have

## The Road We Traveled

worked with volunteers to make significant changes at GWSAE over the seven years since I came on board.

To prepare my remarks, I reflected on the essential ingredients needed to effect positive change at GWSAE over these years.

First, a board that sets direction and at the same time empowers me (the CEO) and staff to move ahead with deliberate speed and determination. I remember

when I had been on the job for only a few days; I called the chairman of the board to ask for his advice on a decision. His response: "That is why we hired you — it is totally your call." At a time when I was so impressionable, it set the tone for how GWSAE was to operate in the future.

Second, risk taking, innovation, and creativity are not only tolerated, but encouraged. Decisions are, of course, made after examining hard data, but also are often based on intuition and experience.

I've discovered that it's necessary to operate with some degree of uncertainty and chaos. Certainly, there is much ambiguity and change in this industry, and even more within GWSAE. Some people and cultures are terrified of change, while others thrive on it. Ours is one that is energized by change and is actually accustomed to it as the natural order of things! That is not to minimize the fact that some members and staff have found the atmosphere to be uncomfortable at times.

One of the most important factors is being a very thoughtful and open-minded listener. The board and staff have made a huge effort to be among peers as much as possible and to translate their conversations into needs that GWSAE can fill.

Listening is really difficult and takes training of the ear and mind for sure.

I have also made it a priority to be exposed to groups outside of the association profession. Cross-fertilization of ideas is so critical. For example, we have invited many people to meet with the board,

members, and staff who are from other sectors and purposefully not involved with

our profession. These include branding experts, publishers, strategic thinkers, and other "non-involved" members of the association community.

A great piece of research we engaged in early on was a positioning study, which

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assessed our current reality and made recommendations on corrections in order to move us to higher levels of service — making a real difference in the lives of those in our market. Careful decisions needed to be made relative to the competitive environment and about how to most effectively *exceed*, not simply *meet* the needs of our various constituents. I recently re-read the list of recommendations in the positioning study and am pleased to say that we have implemented most of them.

Being noticed in an overcrowded marketplace remains a major challenge.

We made a commitment to introduce programs that were new and different — but most of all relevant to our constituent-

cies. The Nation's Capital Distinguished Speakers Series® and the soon-to-be-launched Center for Association Leadership are two examples.

Other critical considerations included hiring talented staff that complement each other's skills and who are willing to operate in an environment of change. We have a true cast of characters on staff in the best sense of the word, who struggle every day to be their best.

Similarly, it was important to recruit committed board members and volunteers and promise an opportunity for professional growth to those who became involved with us. We purposefully seek an eclectic group of people. We ask for volunteers and also invite people to join us. Most recently, Robert Reich and Tom Peters accepted invitations to serve on a Center for Association Leadership VIP Council. Doris Kearns Goodwin and others are also invited. A Blue Ribbon VIP Public Relations group includes Alan Webber of *Fast Company*, Elliott Masie of The Masie Center, and Lisa Myers, CAE of the Electronic Retailing Association, to name just a few.

Finally, on a personal level, I seek out people who think differently than I do, who bring different perspectives to the table. For example, I have a young mentor who is a Gen-Xer. We meet regularly so that I am educated on the thinking of emerging leaders. In addition, I have asked another individual to pay careful attention to GWSAE's offerings and point out when we are doing things that are unimaginative and staid rather than innovative. This person has caught us several times recently, and in each case is 100 percent right.

But perhaps the most important elements in our success are communication, respect, and partnership among the board, volunteers, members, and staff, and the willingness to be bold!

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