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**FOR:** SPJ Executive Committee



## **SPJ GOVERNANCE – BOARD CULTURE**

The most successful and progressive associations strive to create a team culture among its board of directors. Working together, they focus on narrow, strategic goals. They are all rowing in the same direction – all the time. This is made much easier with a smaller board (which I address in the next memo). But, the key is that each board member puts aside specific agendas or projects and focuses on the overall goals of the association.

There is potential for trouble when goals of individual board members don't align with organizational goals. In this instance, individuals may hijack a board's focus and take it in other directions. If a handful of individuals do this, the board loses the ability to stay strategic – as it feels compelled to support each board member's ideas.

SPJ has no shortage of board members that have specific areas of passion. Many times they, have captured the board's attention (and time) in an effort to get support. Some of the most recent examples include: a data project, a gaming journalism contest, discussion on committee meeting transparency, EIJ speakers, etc. Recent SPJ board meetings have been littered with discussions not germane to a larger strategic initiative.

There is a good reason for this: Where else can people present these ideas? Many times, they come from frustration that the board isn't doing enough. In addition, our culture now is that people are *supposed* to bring these ideas up during board meetings – even at the last minute.

Association presidents (or other top leaders) often don't feel comfortable telling fellow board members that their idea isn't appropriate for the board – as they don't want to discourage participation and ideas. But in the best associations, this happens all of the time – in a respectful manner.

Improved board training, where clear expectations are set, also helps manage this potential problem. The president's job, through strategic agendas and meeting management, is to keep the board focused on the organization's goals.

In SPJ's case, those goals are typically set by the president, who is elected by membership. Under a new culture, however, that could change. The board could collectively decide on goals via strategic planning sessions.

Of the three items mentioned in the cover memo, board culture is the easiest to address. It won't be easy, mind you. But it's easier than the others. It doesn't require a vote or bylaws amendment. It simply requires a plan and cooperation from all involved.

The failure in creating a strategic, team-oriented board in the past falls mostly on me. As your executive director, it is my job to ensure leadership is armed with the tools and understanding to be as effective as

possible. It is also my job to help the president create the right environment. Until I began course work on my association management certification last year, I didn't fully understand how to accomplish these things. I saw the symptoms, but didn't know any remedies.

To that end, Lynn and I have already talked briefly about ways to improve the culture after she takes office. Paul and I have had similar conversations regarding the remainder of his term.

Some specific tactics that other associations have used to improve board culture include:

- A. Set agendas that are primarily strategic and foster generative discussion.
- B. Delegate "work" to committees. (SPJ's internal awards/honors selections would be a good example of this).
- C. Provide more relevant board training; including expectations and roles of board and staff.
- D. Improve board development.
- E. Conduct regular virtual board meetings in an effort to keep directors informed on strategic progress and address non-strategic items.
- F. Modify Executive Director's report to focus on progress of strategic initiatives – not minutia.
- G. Curtail use of electronic communications/debate between meetings.

Whether or not the Society chooses to alter the national board structure or delegate governance model (which I address in separate memos), a better board culture would lead to greater successes.

With that said, the current structure of a large, representative board will always severely limit potential.