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## **SPJ GOVERNANCE - NATIONAL BOARD STRUCTURE**

In the book “Race for Relevance,” non-profit association experts Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers say:

*The traditional association operating model – one that’s dependent on direction and decision making by volunteers and support by members – isn’t working as well as it once did. Most associations are tradition driven, slow, and risk-averse. They are characterized by offerings of a broad range of programs, services, products and activities. The model is tied to face-to-face interaction through meetings, conferences, conventions and seminars.*

In my research, most older associations – including SPJ – operate as their traditions set forth. Few have evolved in a dramatic fashion. This is because those that have been around longer struggle to adapt to new ways of operating. This put them behind the 8-ball as society underwent massive changes over the past 40 years.

Associations founded more recently, however, were created with a clean slate *after* many of the recent societal “game-changers” were apparent. Those association-model game-changers include time (people have less of it and are less willing to give it up), value expectations (people expect high return on investment), generational differences, competition and technology.

In speaking directly with Byers, I learned that despite SPJ’s traditional governance model, it is doing better than many other associations. For example, many groups she works with don’t have a robust social media presence. Snail mail may be the main form of communications and the average age of their board members may be 50 or higher. This is confirmed when I speak to executive directors of other associations – inside and outside of journalism.

However, this shouldn’t be misconstrued.

SPJ used to be viewed as *the* leader among journalism associations. Today, it’s a player. What will it be tomorrow?

It’s clear by SPJ’s years-long membership decline that it continues to lose relevance among members and potential members – even though it may be regaining relevance among other associations – specifically in the advocacy realm.

Byers and Coerver went on to say,

*While most associations and professional societies are not in immediate danger, they will struggle if they cling to conventional approaches and structures....Professional societies will have members, but they will lose relevance*

*as their members' average age climbs. If they are not careful, they risk going the way of some community and civic organizations.*

The book, which I found to be the most on-target in relation to SPJ's challenges, goes on to suggest that the associations that will thrive – not just survive – are those that undertake five radical changes.

First on that list: Overhaul the governance model and committee operations.

The next four steps include: Empowering the CEO and enhance staff expertise; rigorously define the member market; rationalize programs and services; and build a robust technology framework.

A governance overhaul is the most important, but it's also the most difficult. If this step is not achieved, there will be little, if any, chance of making meaningful progress on the other steps.

This memo specifically addresses national board structure. In my opinion, this is the first radical step to maximizing SPJ's potential.

To that end, I believe leadership must address two overarching problems regarding the national board.

1. It is based on representation, not competency.
2. It is too large.

## **REPRESENTATION VS. COMPETENCY MODELS**

Although there are thousands of variations, two basic types of non-profit governance dominate the association landscape: representative models and competency models.

**Representative governance** is a bottom up approach where constituents elect board members based on specific criteria such as geography, interest divisions, job titles, etc.

This was the predominant model in the early 1900s, when the Society was founded. Like SPJ, most associations at the time were formed first at the local level, then grew into national prominence as members and word spread slowly across the country. National governance was a way to amplify the voice of its chapters, which provided direction for the association.

Today, this model often provides a sense of comfort for members – ensuring the association won't go in a direction counter to their desires. Furthermore, most people in the U.S. can relate as it closely resembles our nation's democratic process. This deep-rooted connection between the association model and democracy is especially true for SPJ members given their profession. An association of corporate CEOs, however, would view this model much differently.

This model, seen mostly in older associations, is characterized by larger boards that are rarely efficient and strategic. Many of the board members serve out of obligation. Elections are mostly uncontested. Collectively, the board may have trouble making decisions, as each member may have different priorities. Representative boards are designed to take direction from chapters/members before acting,

making them slow to react, sometimes apprehensive in decision-making without more input. They are typically risk-averse.

What's interesting is that many groups formed at the national level STILL adopt a representative model – despite its inefficiencies. Examples of this in the journalism world include NABJ, NAHJ, RTDNA and many others. Experts surmise there are two main reasons for this.

First, when starting an association most people “survey the landscape” to see how others are structured. Representative models are still very prevalent, as any internet search will pull up no shortage of “regional” board positions. Many journalism associations are representative based on geography AND job title (Region 1 Director and Campus Adviser At-Large, for example). Also, it's common sense to think that if a national association wants to establish a grass-roots effort, it needs boots on the ground – with a formal regional structure. I suspect many journalism associations looked at SPJ's model when they launched.

Secondly, Americans believe in a representative democracy. This is especially true of SPJ members. We work every day to uphold these ideals. Democracy makes people comfortable. Having their voice represented in the board room gives them a sense of power and trust.

Of course, most membership associations still have elections. Ultimately, members choose their leaders. So, even a competency-based board has a democratic element. The difference is that all association members usually vote on all candidates. Board seats aren't restricted by geography, job skills, etc.

**Competency-based governance** is a top-down approach where board members are elected based solely on their ability to lead. Competency-based boards may seek different types of candidates each election cycle to meet the needs of today. The people filling these leadership posts are often CEOs, top managers or visionaries who are used to seeing the big picture in their day jobs.

This governance model is more predominant with associations formed in the late 1900s and after. The national association determines the direction of the association. Chapters enhance the organization's goals and mission, but don't dictate direction.

Organizations that have competency-based models usually have a rigorous nominations process to ensure a quality board of directors. People simply can't “throw their hat into the ring.”

Diversity in thought and experience is critical. To achieve this, the types of candidates sought each year may change in an effort to have a well-rounded board. In many cases, associations have board members that aren't members of the association – if particular expertise is needed. Some even have spots that are for appointees only – allowing boards to appoint members after an election to ensure diverse, expert perspectives.

This governance model, which typically has a smaller board, is similar to a corporate model – where a handful of the best and brightest lead the way. They then leverage committees, task forces and staff to do the heavy lifting.

Starting this model from scratch is fairly easy. But, as you would expect, transitioning from a representative model to a competency model is very difficult. Despite its clear advantages, it usually makes members uneasy. The result is that associations will tinker with their governance in an effort to become more “nimble.” Yet, they will retain their representative nature – minimizing its effectiveness and leading to continued frustration.

## **BOARD SIZE**

A common refrain from association leaders is that their board is too large. A common rebuttal from board members is that size doesn't matter. If it's effective and can make decisions, size is irrelevant. Yet, most “decisions” being referred to are related to management, not setting strategy.

Think back to the SPJ board's strategic work in New Orleans. Would it have been more effective with fewer people? Could we have agreed quicker? Could we have drilled down farther? Did the larger group present more great ideas? Or did it simply produce more to wade through?

Although a smaller board doesn't guarantee a more effective board, research shows that it greatly improves the chances.

Why?

Primarily, it's a simple numbers game. A smaller board has fewer spots to fill. Instead of looking for 25 qualified people, you may only need to find nine. And, taking the competency-based model into account, those nine could come from anywhere. Geographical/job title/interest division representation is not a factor.

Play this out in SPJ's world. We need to find 23 people. But 12 of them have to be from a specific region. Two of them have to be students. Two of them have to be campus advisers. Often, we struggle to find one person willing to fill these spots.

Now, imagine if SPJ had to find 11 leaders from anywhere.

What gives you the most likely chance to succeed?

Secondly, smaller boards generally optimize the skills of each member. Directors are often chosen for a specific skill set and are counted on to contribute. It's noticeable when they don't. This leads to a more engaged set of leaders.

Lastly, associations spend far less time and money supporting smaller boards – freeing resources for other initiatives.

A quick Google search will tell you that there is no perfect board size. Several books on association management will tell you the same thing: The perfect size depends on the organization's needs.

Byers and Coerver disagree. In their opinion, there is a perfect number: 5

Here is the theory: On typical larger boards, the association is actually governed by the officers or executive committee of about five people. They surmise, if five people are doing most of the governing, why not eliminate the extraneous positions. Let them work where their interests lie – committees, task forces, one-off volunteer opportunities for programs and services, etc. Why can't the five people – elected by membership after a rigorous nominations process – lead the way?

In SPJ's current world, the seven-member executive committee doesn't necessarily govern. Although it used to be truer than it is today. When I was hired in 2009, it was common for the executive committee to make decisions – albeit they usually weren't strategic. Today, it operates more as a task force, vetting ideas and discussing proposals that are eventually presented to the board for consideration. In some instances, the executive committee works on items that the board directs. In this role, the officers actually become a working group – not a strategic body of leaders.

This culture shift is because many on the board preferred decisions be made by the full group, not the executive committee. Ironically, this second layer of approval is one of the reasons SPJ isn't very nimble. The more discussion that takes place, the more "holes" any proposal will encounter. In some cases, the board then wants to hear from membership before moving. The majority of the feedback (usually received over a few weeks or a month) usually comes from the association's most loyal and longtime – who may be averse to change.

Despite a desire to be nimble, this is how large, representative boards become slow and risk-averse.

I'm not necessarily advocating for a five-person board. But I do think the principle behind that number is valid. In short, choose the right amount of seats that would allow for a diverse, strategic board. No more, no less. There are other ways to get input from members.

The goal of the most progressive associations is to have boards led by big-picture thinkers – guided by a president who can keep the group on task. This is far more achievable if the board is smaller and not restricted by specific representation.