

Compliance & Ethics

PROFESSIONAL



Vol. 6 / No. 5
10 / 2009

A PUBLICATION OF THE SOCIETY OF CORPORATE COMPLIANCE AND ETHICS

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Meet Tony Boswell

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Every member counts

Roy Snell



Our association must ensure that we unconditionally represent and support compliance and ethics professionals. There are national associations that some believe are confused about who they are supposed to be supporting. The American Association of Retired People (AARP), American Medical Association (AMA), and some other associations have been recently accused of having problems. Some believe that their decisions are affected by people who give them a larger amount of money than the average member. Some believe it stifles their ability to represent their membership. Their decisions have been questioned in the press. Some of their members don't feel that they are representing the members. They see the polls and don't understand why the organization doesn't appear to be representing the average member. If these organizations drift from their mission because they receive too much money from "non traditional/core members," they are subject to conflicts of interest. I have no idea if their members and the press are correct. However, it is a very common problem for professional organizations. There is a way to prevent it, but it requires strong leadership and strong will to represent the profession and its average member. It may require some conflict in the short run, but it will prevent untold conflict in the long run.

When you see these organizations doing things that don't match what the average member wants, you have to wonder why. They may think they know better. They may think they need to lead their members in a particular direction for their own good. Or they may be conflicted, as the public and the press seem to feel in the case of the AMA and AARP. When you have a financial model in which the vendors' money becomes more important than the money you take from your members, you just might be conflicted. These associations are not the American Association of Retired People's vendors and the American Medical Association's vendors. They are the associations that are supposed to represent retired people and the physicians. We can learn from others.

We have a corporate membership that is optional and not often promoted. We have very few corporate members. The corporate membership is \$2,500. It comes with four individual memberships, and those people are treated as individual members. It really isn't a traditional corporate membership. The corporate members' logos are displayed on occasion, but there are no committee's assignments or any other special designation or influence granted to them. Our desire is to charge our members \$295 per year, have that be the most important source of income,

and to represent every one of those members to the best of our ability. We also get sponsorship money from vendors, but it is a small fraction of our overall income. We want to keep it that way, and it has to stay that way to stay focused on our mission, which is supporting the compliance and ethics profession.

Our desire is to keep this an individual membership organization. We want to represent all the members and the profession equally. We don't want to take large sums of money from anyone and give them control over the organization. We don't want to be influenced by anyone but the membership at large. We do not want our decisions influenced by money, the size of an organization, job title, or someone's special status.

Many professional organizations use some form of a pay-for-play model. We have wonderful vendors. Some of them have been forced to work with pay-for-play by other associations. Pay-for-play is simply the process of attaching money to a decision. We believe that accepting money to get a speaking opportunity, endorsement, or a committee assignment is inappropriate. On just a couple of occasions, people have called with a pay-for-play idea like the ones that they were forced to use by other organizations. When someone brings up a pay-for-play concept, our conversation ends immediately. We have told

them, in no uncertain terms, that is not going to happen here. In 13 years, all but one or two said they assumed we operated like some of the other organizations and were glad not to do business that way. Most became great sponsors and/or members. Pay-for-play isn't the only way conflicted and potentially bad decisions are made. Some associations have trouble addressing individual issues from overbearing members or a member from a large company.

We have an outstanding board. One of our staff recently went to the national meeting for association executives. He said many of the other associations talked about how their boards behaved badly. This staff member loved our board before, but had no idea how lucky we are to have a board that understands their role and leads so well. We have worked very hard to get to where we are. We know how easy it is to slide down the slippery slope of succumbing to people with money, power, or a pushy personality. We don't wait until it's too late to turn back. We don't wait to address these problems until they are irrevocably intertwined into our culture, like others have. We stop the first instance of pay-for-play or other forms of abuse of power. Sometimes this is considered too much fuss over a little thing. Most culture creep starts with little problems and, by the time problems become "big enough to fight over," it's too late to turn back.

Sometimes by making a big deal out of little things, you send a clear message, "If they are going to freak out over that, then there is no question that what I want to do won't work." If you send a clear message

by dealing with the first instance of a problem (no matter how small it is), you end up not having to do it as often. Some organizations "let go of the little problem," they "avoided conflict," or they "waited for a more substantial offence to make their point." In the long run, they have more conflict.

We once had an influential member who was a compliance officer and his organization was also a sponsor. A request he made became one of these teachable moments. It was not a big problem; most would have just looked the other way. For us, it became an opportunity to set the tone of the organization. He wanted us to read a full page, single-spaced bio as his introduction, prior to his presentation at a major conference. There were no margins, no title, and all small print. He crammed everything he could onto a single page and still have it be readable. We average about four sentences as introductions for our speakers for a reason. We go out of our way not to let self-aggrandizement seep in to our organization and become a focus of the organization. We don't parade past presidents up to the podium at the annual meeting to tell everyone how special everyone is. We want to teach and provide networking opportunities for our members at our conferences. We don't introduce some blowhard who then introduces some blowhard to introduce some other blowhard who introduces the general session speaker. We don't give plaque after plaque to people who have done something. We try to keep the recognition during our conferences to a minimum. We do it for

our leaders at board meetings and for the profession at large at a dinner.

I told this influential member that we had to get his intro down to four sentences. He said his PR department had a policy that said that we had to read it all. I said we have a policy that says we can't. To be perfectly honest, it wasn't a written policy approved by some committee, but it was what our speaker forms suggested, and it was what everyone did. I was getting aggravated that I was forced to even have to address this. It just seemed like common sense to me. When ever I have to have conflict to accomplish something as blindingly obvious as this, I get aggravated. He then said, "We will have to reconsider our sponsorship." I said that that would be just fine. He stopped his sponsorship. He eventually threatened to go to another organization and we ignored that threat.

Some would cave in simply because they want to avoid conflict. Some would cave in because they are afraid of losing money. In the long run, I believe you will do better financially if you do the right thing. Subsequent to him taking his sponsorship money elsewhere, we have doubled in size, built a strong reserve, and we have done better in this bad economy than any other association I know of. The point is that there is no reason to go down this slippery slope of changing the way you do business for pay-for-play money. There are better ways to generate revenue. Organizations that have altered their mission or operations for money never really needed to do it. They could have been successful anyway.

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They have lost their way to avoid a small conflict. On top of it all, they attract people who behave poorly. There is an interesting additional benefit of setting the proper tone in a professional organization. People who are disproportionately interested in their own benefit tend to go away. People who have the organization's best interest in mind tend to become its leaders. But, you can not get there from here without standing up to the first instance of the problem.

Last week, I told a colleague in our office that I had to have a difficult discussion with a member. I was reminded that this member was about to sign a sponsorship agreement. I said the money was irrelevant, relative to fixing what amounted to an operational problem. I also strongly believed that this member would have no problem separating our differing views on a matter unrelated to the sponsorship question. The member and I talked, and we agreed to a resolution to the problem. A few days later, he concluded his sponsorship discussion with my colleague. He did not tie the problem to the sponsorship decision. We attract good people who allow us to manage this organization with the members and the profession as our primary mission. This is the way we have done things (almost perfectly, but not always) for 13 years. That may have cost us a little in the short run, but it is probably one of the biggest reasons we are now the largest compliance and ethics organization in the world. We got there, not because we caved into people with money; we got there because we didn't cave into people with money. Ironically, in the

long run, you will get more money if you make good decisions.

There is another nasty side effect of running an organization through power and intimidation. People who give a lot sometimes expect more and, on occasion, demand more. It usually comes in the form of control of a portion of the organization's decision-making process or personal recognition. To appease these people, some organizations set up countless, and often pointless, committees. The committee members all believe they have been put on the committee to do something meaningful. They aren't assuming the intent was to appease them with a bogus committee assignment. They expect to make big decisions. Because all the committees can't run one organization, those who pay to play on the committee get frustrated. They don't feel they have enough control. Their frustration causes them to overreach and demand that their committee be involved in more and more decisions. This appeasement technique often fails to appease and simultaneously hurts the organization.

They insist that more and more decisions be run by their committee, and sometimes several committees demand to oversee or be involved with the same decision. Then they have to wait months for their next committee to meet. If the second committee doesn't like something the first committee did, it may require that the issue goes back to the first committee. Decisions are delayed and opportunities are missed. Decisions are watered down to appease all of the personalities on the committees. Most importantly, the committees

don't always represent the interest of the average member. The committee represents the interest of the member who has power or money, and their interests may or may not coincide with the average member's. Because they were selected in a biased manner, it is unlikely that they will be unbiased. Frankly, I could not think of a more tortured way to select people for a committee than to pick people who believe this is appropriate.

Even those organizations that set up countless committees eventually run out of options. Sometimes they resort to setting up huge committees to appease people. Large committees frustrate members. In most cases, there is an inverse relationship between committee size and effectiveness. The committees take staff time to set agendas, coordinate meeting times, set up phone calls, take minutes, etc. etc. Members' money is pored down the rat hole of appeasing people with power or money. Eventually, the organization comes to a grinding halt, because there are so many committees. The staff aren't helping the profession, but rather, they are catering to the powerful. Constant acquiescing to these demands hurts the organization and, in many cases, fails to even appeal to those they are intending to pacify. Nobody wins but the person who avoided the conflict in the first place, and they end up with more tension and conflict in the long run. Now the organization is irrevocably steeped in constant turmoil. The leaders, who avoided the initial conflict by saying yes when they should have tried to explain the situation,

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become disenchanted, oddly enough, with the culture they created.

Ultimately, the staff and some members become discouraged. Pay-for-play and acquiescing to powerful people to make bad decisions hurts the organizational culture. It deflates the whole organization. When that happens, the negative side effects can be significant. It can have a negative impact on the entire operation. Just ask any organization that did not stand up to the first instance of this and ended up with it everywhere. I am sure many will tell you they wished they had dealt with it when they had the chance.

By focusing on the mission and not acquiescing to power or money, you end up attracting strong vendors, strong board members, and strong members. We disappoint those who believe their special interests should be attended to or their donations be rewarded. People should pick people based on ability, experience, and their non-financial contribution to the

profession. By focusing on the mission and not acquiescing to power or money, you end up disappointing and driving away people who feel that power or money should be a determining factor. This is not a problem. You never want to drive people away, but it just so happens that, occasionally, it's in your best interests. If you make bad decisions just to keep from disappointing someone, you just might end up building a culture that drives away good people. You will be driving away the very people you need.

Our mission is to represent the profession, and we are representing the profession. We represent the compliance and ethics profession and EVERYONE who is involved in the profession or helping the profession. Because we are a young and developing profession, our profession is very vulnerable. This is a very important time to make sure that the profession is represented without bias. ✦

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