Putting the “Public” in Public-Serving Associations: A Board Imperative

Several years ago, the board of a professional association with which I was affiliated asked a facilitator to lead a strategic planning exercise. The objective was to identify the goals that the organization should undertake on behalf of its members, most of whom serve the public. The assigned reading for the session? Good to Great, penned by management guru Jim Collins, whose lessons the facilitator undoubtedly believed would be well replicated by our nonprofit organization. The problem? For Collins, “organization” is synonymous with “company,” where success is defined in large part by financial performance. In our case, not necessarily: our measure of success is how well we achieve our core mission, which is focused on collective action and the public good.

Although anecdotal, this example shows us the realities and practicalities with which boards of nonprofit, mission-driven organizations must deal: growing an endowment, constantly searching for creative funding sources, addressing internal management challenges that inevitably rise to their level, fulfilling their

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Commentary
Both the title and content of Beth Gazley’s article, “Good Governance in Professional Associations for Public Employees: Evidence of a Public Service Ethos?,” make a key assumption: that a public service ethos should be integrated into the good governance practices of a professional organization serving public employees. In that regard, her article serves as a strong reminder that board members must not lose sight of the public service responsibility they bring to their position—not only in terms of demonstrating norms of behavior to their own fellow directors or members, a primary focus of this article, but also asserting it when advancing their organization’s mission externally.

As Gazley points out, the field has lacked substantial research to inform our understanding of associations that serve governmental employees and interests. Her work provides a constructive step in remediating this dearth of scholarship; it also shows us there clearly is much more to do. In many respects, the article raises more questions than answers. That the findings do not support a main hypothesis—that public-serving associations reflect stronger efforts at governance than private-serving associations—for primarily public membership organizations begs the question, why? Gazley conjectures possible reasons, as she also does with respect to why chief executive officers of associations with some or mostly public sector members are less— not more—likely to rate their boards excellent in “leading in a way that maintains public trust in nonprofits.”

Rather than a weakness of Gazley’s methodology, these questions very well may reflect the current state of our public service field and its professional organizations. The work of government has become increasingly blurred given the role of private—for-profit and nonprofit—entities and the fact that government recruitment challenges have forced potential applicants to pursue public service through nongovernmental opportunities. We must consider the extent to which these individuals are indeed influenced to join a public-serving association, represented on a board, and are the focus of board members’ attention. Gazley provides us fertile ground for future inquiry, as she treats both primarily public-serving organizations and those with a mix of private sector and public sector members.

Looking to the future, researchers would do well to cast their sights on two additional dimensions of professional associations. They are the dimensions with which nonprofit executives deal frequently, many times even more often than boards: board committees and the members themselves. It is in these two areas that we may find answers to Gazley’s questions. At a minimum, they may provide us a better grasp on how to inculcate a greater public service ethic in the work of our associations.

To be sure, the board—the governing body—is legally and financially responsible for the conduct of an organization. Yet in so many cases, it is at the committee level that the organization’s rubber meets the road, where many of its hardest decisions are made. Take the finance committee tasked with providing prudent fiscal oversight, or the governance committee that ensures that the board operates at an optimum level, or the nominating committee that infuses the organization with well-qualified leadership. To what degree does the public service ethos permeate the structure and activities of these bodies? These are the places where the answers to the questions may matter the most, and where the public ethos is particularly critical.

Then, we must look to the members, the lifeblood of any organization. To develop her findings and conclusions, Gazley draws on a survey of association chief executive officers or executive directors, certainly a valid approach and whose answers she controls for using several variables. Future research should reach outward and determine the extent to which the members themselves feel their board possesses and demonstrates the public service values they should expect and deserve. After all, the notion that individuals bring a sense of public service responsibility to their roles as board members is the same notion why, at least in part, members join the organization in the first place.

Public service values—from transparency to ethics, social equity to accountability—are more than mere buzzwords. They are what we expect those who serve the public good to exhibit in their work every day. Gazley’s article reminds us that we should expect the same of our boards and that we, association executives, must arm them with the tools to do so.