

How Dissent Makes for a Stronger Association

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In a world where increasing numbers of cultures and generations come together to form your association, work in your office, and sit on your committees, differing opinions are unavoidable. But how does your organization handle dissent from members, volunteers, and staff? Do people from all levels in your organization feel comfortable saying, "Yes, I know we've always done it this way, but I have a new idea," or does your culture foster an unspoken feeling of "I better not make waves if I want to keep my position"?

The traditional association governance structure invites a command-and-control leadership environment, says Cynthia D'Amour, leadership strategist at People Power Unlimited. In command-and-control leadership, the top person is in control and makes the final decisions, and the people under the leader are discouraged from expressing different ideas.

"When you bring in new people, they bring in fresh ideas, and they give dissent to the way we've always done it," D'Amour says. However, their enthusiasm might be met with roadblocks from a command-and-control leader, perhaps a committee chair or board member who feels like he or she has earned the right to implement a particular agenda. "You get a committee chair who comes in and says, 'This is my year. If you disagree with me, you are a traitor,'" she says. "They don't value the dissent. They find it offensive."

As traditional association practices evolve, however, so too must their capacity to leverage dissent from staff, volunteers, and members. When leaders find ways to positively reinforce the value of open discourse, they can make dissent a part of their organizations' everyday culture.

Valuing Dissent in a Command-and-Control Environment

The hierarchical nature of associations may be no match for that of government agencies, but the people within the U.S. Foreign Service have created innovative pathways for dissenting opinions, despite the hierarchy. In an effort to give employees a way to express their opinions on U.S. foreign policy up the chains of command, the U.S. State Department created an official Dissent Channel in 1971. Anything submitted through the channel is distributed to the Secretary of State as well as other senior State Department officials, and the rules dictate that employees who express their opinions through the channel will not face disciplinary action or retaliation.

In addition, each year the American Foreign Service Association awards four Dissent Awards to members of the Foreign Service and other organizations who object to official U.S. foreign policy or working conditions through constructive dissent and who "work constructively through the hierarchy through the chain of command to advocate for change," says AFSA President Susan Johnson. "Allowing for constructive dissent is a critical

ingredient for healthy and successful institutions. We wanted to recognize the courage and professionalism of people who have stepped forward."

The honors have been around for more than 30 years, says AFSA Executive Director Ian Houston, and the cash awards and formal recognition have been given to individuals at all levels who have advocated for positive change. Winners must dissent within the system and must not take to the media, Congress, or other public channels to call for change. "We're talking about applying ideas and putting them into action," he says. "Ultimately what we're looking for is a change in policy or a formal policy that will affect lives."

One of 2010's winners aided the victims of sexual abuse. In 2009, when Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton planned a trip to the Congo to examine the state of violence against women, someone suggested that the U.S. military conduct short-term surgical or psychological treatments for victims of sexual abuse. A two-star general approved the idea, and the project was set in motion.

But Diana Putman, a mid-level health specialist in the United States Agency for International Development, objected to the idea, saying the troops were not equipped to understand the cultural and language differences and that nongovernmental organizations in the Congo were better positioned to help. A better way the military could help would be to construct or rehabilitate buildings that others could use to help victims. Even though Putman found \$1 million in funding for her idea, the general's signature on the project meant that a change of plan was almost insurmountable.

Putman kept pushing her superiors to change their minds, and ultimately she found a four-star general who approved her proposal. Not only did Putman's fight up the chain of command earn Congo much-needed support for its victims of sexual abuse, but it also earned Putman an AFSA award.

Creating an Environment That Invites Dissent

For today's diverse associations, creating a formal channel for dissenting opinions might not be the right approach, says Sharon Kneebone, IOM, CAE, director of membership for the Institute of Food Technologists. Kneebone has worked with boards and CEOs that face leadership challenges, and she says dissent comes from the inability to communicate or create dialogue within an organization. The key for leadership in associations, she says, is to create an open, two-way communication system that fosters healthy discussions of dissenting opinions, rather than limiting dissent to a formal process.

"You can create an environment where dissent becomes a part of the culture and is not a standalone event," Kneebone says.

At the AFSA offices, Houston says his staff encourages two-way communication and does not use a formal method for dissent. "The professional staff members know that they have avenues to come directly to me to talk about any differences of opinions or constructive ideas about the direction of the organization."

But even if leaders decide to open the channels of communication, organizations may face challenges in teaching people to question authority and in helping leadership listen to the feedback. Employees may fear that speaking up will lead to retribution or retaliation, and leadership may not understand how to handle dissent.

In the late 1970s, a mid-level U.S. embassy officer in Buenos Aires, Argentina, heard reports from Argentines about friends and family who were disappearing. F. Allen "Tex" Harris kept track of the incidents on index cards, which soon exceeded 15,000, pointing to "a massive, coherent, military effort to exterminate the Argentine citizens," Harris wrote in an essay for the book *Inside a U.S. Embassy: How the Foreign Service Works for America* by Shawn Dorman.

At first his superiors at the embassy welcomed his reports, but soon his findings started to make the U.S. government nervous about its political relationship with the Argentine government. When they began to "spin" his reports, Harris stopped sending them through diplomatic telegrams and started using methods that did not have to be cleared by the front office.

When one of his letters resulted in the cancellation of a multimillion-dollar U.S. government loan guarantee to a major American corporation involved with the Argentine Navy, Harris came close to losing his job and received a formal warning for defying his superiors. But years later, he was rewarded for his dissent with a Distinguished Honor Award from the State Department, and AFSA named one of its awards after him.

Ambassador Edward Peck, a two-time AFSA Dissent Award winner, says some of the people who received the AFSA awards damaged their careers with their dissent, but many former winners have gone on to receive ambassadorships and become better leaders themselves.

"Speaking truth to power can be dangerous, because bosses don't always like to be told that they're not doing something right," Peck says. "Nobody told Saddam Hussein because they might have feared their lives. Nobody told Donald Rumsfeld because they might have feared their jobs."

When Mark Dorsey, CAE, moved from senior-staff level to executive director and CEO of the American Snowsports Education Association (ASEA), he wanted colleagues to offer dissenting opinions. But he found that its culture trended toward a top-down hierarchy and squashed what he calls "productive conflicts." Dorsey hired two separate consultants to help the staff and him learn to trust their own instincts and voice their opinions constructively.

"If there isn't productive conflict, people aren't actively participating in the leadership," Dorsey says. "It's easy for someone in a subordinate position to say, 'The CEO said we're doing this, and that's the way we're going to do it.' The organization needs a staff that makes decisions on their own and is making good quality decisions."

Dorsey says the process to change ASEA's culture involved transforming the entire association into a more confident and trusting organization. In order to feel comfortable expressing dissent, employees, members, and volunteers need to trust that their opinions will be valued and given full attention and not ignored. Dorsey says most of the staffers went through the cultural changes with the consultants and ended up being a much more productive, happy group, both within the association and externally.

"The evidence that the culture has changed is that there are more self-starting meetings going on. The quality of decisions is going up. There's a whole lot more of 'What do we think?' and less of 'What would Mark do?'"

The Grumpy Member or the Constructive Dissenter

The next challenge to creating a culture that embraces dissent is to help people understand what dissent is. According to Kneebone, constructive dissent is much more than expressing displeasure; learning how to do it right takes training and patience.

"A grumpy member will have negative feedback continually for you. They never offer solutions, always negative feedback," Kneebone says. "A constructive dissenter would say, 'I have a concern, and here's why I'm concerned. Here's the unintended consequences, and have you considered this as an alternative?'"

Dorsey says people who complain instead of offering constructive dissent are "siloed victims with no real proposal for a solution."

In contrast, Dorsey says, "the person engaged with constructive dissent will be comfortable enough in their own skin to be able to say, 'I'd just like to brainstorm ideas, and they may be different than we've done before.' They will have faith in our culture that their questions and opinions are accepted. The person that complains will already have judged that coming up with new ideas is not OK. They're self-defeating."

Dorsey says he and his staff worked together to establish a better system for constructive dissent. "When staff members come up with recommendations, they have to come up with at least two. Nine hundred ninety-nine times out of a thousand, their recommendations are the right recommendations, so I don't have to select an alternative and make a change. My job has become fostering good decision making and supporting them as much as possible," rather than making top-down decisions, he says.

Public Dissent: The Effect of Social Media

Social media has opened lines of communication but hasn't necessarily created a culture for two-way conversations. AFSA's Houston says true constructive dissent in the Foreign Service requires a lot more than a "quick, snappy comment on social media." He says dissent "is a longer, well-thought-out, articulated message or actions that may go over several months. There has to be a depth to it."

But the fact that social media outlets exist to express dissenting opinions may be one of the reasons AFSA has seen a decrease in the number of nominations for its awards, adds AFSA President Johnson. "We feel that we need to get a 21st-century take on how dissent should be manifested and in what ways it can be manifested so that it strengthens our policy making.

"Something has changed, and we're trying to figure out what about it has changed," she says. "Might we see with the new infusion of hiring that more of the younger generation is more inclined to dissent? They're more inclined to speak up on personnel and administrative things, but will they speak on policy things? We just don't know."

David Kushner, CMP, CAE, works with nonprofit CEOs and boards and says associations that embrace social media as a channel for feedback and dissent will help groups start valuable conversations with their members.

"Today, associations are reaching out to members in so many constructive ways. That alone encourages engagement. It encourages speaking the truth to the power centers," Kushner says.

Inviting and managing dissent within your organization is essential for a healthy association, Kushner says, but listening to the dissent is critical. "We've opened the gates for information. You can't just shut it down. If you open all these channels of communication, you have to be prepared to hear things besides, 'Great job!'"

Kushner says organizations should create policies and procedures for dealing with dissent in social media channels but do not necessarily need to create a formal procedure for dissent. "We don't have to open channels of dissent. We have to open channels of conversation."

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