

Discussion Paper-Professional Association Effectiveness

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1 Introduction

This discussion paper represents critical reflection of the author's experiences with a number of professional organisations, tertiary study in 3 disciplines, extensive OHS and Learning experience, working with 2 excellent leaders, extensive research on leadership and comment from a number of OHS, Training and Human Resource Management associations and their members in Australia and overseas. My long term mentor in OHS, Brisbane based OHS consultant, Geoff McDonald, has influenced my thoughts as this paper relates to OHS. I thank the many people who contributed. Most of the comment has come from Australia and Canada, approximately 50 people contributed.

The major topics in this discussion paper are-

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7 Appendix 1 What members say they value in their professional organisation

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2 Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide practical and helpful advice to professional organisations and their members with the aim of ensuring maximum effectiveness.

3 Scope

It is considered this report is particularly applicable to Occupational Health & Safety, Training and Development and Human Resources professional organisations in Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America. Other professional organisations may also benefit from this report.

4 Objective

This paper is a private project not aligned to any organisations I have been associated with. My objective is to provide guidance to professional organisations and their members with the view of ensuring effective professional organisations that are-

Leading and monitoring professional principles, process and practice and promoting a body of knowledge specific to the profession.

Encouraging and prioritising research and development to advance professional knowledge and disseminating this knowledge to the stakeholders.

Influential with government, business, unions and other key stakeholders

Credible and increasing the profession's visibility and reputation

Identifying and satisfying member needs

Challenging the status quo

Providing excellent learning for members

Providing a pleasant and enjoyable social outlet for members

Facilitating networking of members and enabling communication and connection

Minimising disputes with members

Being loyal to members and professional ideals

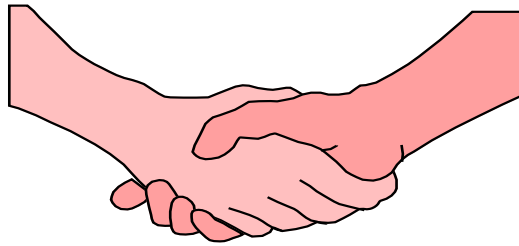
Treating all interactions with dignity, respect and compassion

Having an appropriate sense of humour

5 Guiding principle

INITIATING CHANGE

- When initiating change remember “People support what they create”



6 Recommendations for ensuring an effective professional organisation

It has been suggested that the following must be in place AND seen to be in place to have an effective organisation-

- 1 Dynamic, visible, accessible, caring leadership
- 2 Open, honest, focussed and succinct communication
- 3 Transparent governance

If you do not have the above, you will have trust issues and when trust goes out the door you are in big trouble.

A major reason why professional organisations exist is to advocate for the profession. Liaising with and seeking to influence business, government, unions and other stakeholders is essential.

Professional organisations must have huge but realistic goals. One of the goals of an OHS professional organisation should be the minimisation of Class 1 personal damage occurrences (Personal damage occurrences are more commonly referred to by the emotive and divisive term “accidents”) Class 1 personal damage is that which permanently alters the future of the individual. Another goal of an OHS professional association should be to encourage government to establish a nation-wide, consistent and practical Class 1 personal damage occurrence data system that is readily able to be accessed and interpreted. Whatever goals are decided upon there must be a determined effort to achieve those goals.

Professional associations must encourage and support research into the profession.

It appears the development of a body of knowledge specific to the profession is not generally facilitated well in some professions. Learning needs analysis and consultation with all the stakeholders is necessary. Development of the body of knowledge must be guided by both theory and practice. For an OHS professional organisation, for example, the body of knowledge must be informed by the permanently life altering personal damage occurrence phenomenon. A body of knowledge will be useful to guide universities and other education providers in developing learning programs really targeted at the profession's needs.

Have an appropriate balance between strategic and operational approaches.

It is essential to treat everyone you interact with in a caring, compassionate and respectful manner even if you disagree strongly with them. To not do so will build antagonism, weaken trust and in a litigious society will land you in a lot of trouble. When people express opinions contrary to yours it is wisest to explain your point of view rather than leave the other person in limbo. Internal and external interactions of all parties must reflect the fore-going.

Management must be held accountable to members and their performance monitored. They must be conscious of the need to avoid the psychological process of group-think.

Professional organisations must monitor the latest thinking in their country and overseas to ensure they are aware of latest professional principles, process and practice.

Beware of displacement activities, a displacement activity is something we do, something we put a lot of energy into, but when we examine it closely there is no valid reason to do it. Some professions have many displacement activities.

Standards and / or requirements to maintain membership of the professional body may be appropriate.

It could be argued that those in management positions in professional associations are there primarily for their management skills not their technical skills. Notwithstanding this they will be seen as much more credible if they have technical skills aligned to the profession they represent.

Grading of levels of professional membership will be advantageous, reaching the highest levels must be seen as a significant achievement and assessment procedures must be rigorous and involve significant academic achievement, practical experience in senior, influential, positions and submission of a significant, work based reflective journal. There will be many effective hands on members in organisations who may not have high academic qualifications, value their contribution through appropriate recognition mechanisms.

Credibility in organisations and their leaders is the most important quality people are looking for, credibility is the foundation of leadership. There is no place for big egos and self interest in leadership.

Trade shows at conferences can be a useful and satisfying adjunct. Political speakers at conferences need balance, the organisation needs to be and be seen to be apolitical. There is a fine line between consultants presenting the latest technical information and their marketing their products and services, procedures need to be in place to manage this.

Think about using interactive approaches rather than lectures at conferences and associated courses.

Formal coaching / mentoring programs for organisation members can have excellent results. Often informal get togethers over a coffee provide significant learning and are not to be ignored. Networking requires time and effort to get the best results.

It sounds so basic I hesitate to mention it but responding quickly and thoroughly to member communications is often overlooked in my experience. Follow up appears to be the weakest link in the chain.

Many organisation members will want their work published by the organisation, in some cases the work will not come up to organisational standards. Rather than reject with little or no feedback it is wise for editors to liaise with members on bringing the work up to the required standard. Rigorous academic papers and research has its place but papers on members critical reflection on practice is another ripe avenue for learning.

It is appropriate for professional organisations to aim for the highest standards possible, often this will involve strategic and academic approaches. Do not forget a considerable number of your members will be hands on and practical and also deserve the organisations assistance.

Be beyond reproach in everything you do, if you are not, you will be found out eventually.

Employment services, job postings or job board, will provide a useful service to members.

Have a balance with how much you tell members how good the organisation is, if you are really good they will figure it out for themselves.

Discussion forums are powerful tools for professional organisations but can make things worse if there is lack of response and action by management to issues raised. There are a number of restrictions that must be applied to discussion forums for very good reasons eg. Nothing illegal, sexual in nature etc. but the really vexed issue is what to do with criticism of the organisation. Within limits I suggest the criticism of the organisation should be allowed on discussion forums so as to give greater insight into perceived problems in the organisation. Deleting posts that are critical of organisations can invoke freedom of speech arguments and erode trust. Discussion forums require intelligent moderation and clear rules.

While criticism of the organisation may be unwelcome it may also be valid. Mature organisations will respond to criticism, engage the critic and build a solution. If there is a volume of criticism it may be that the organisation is doing things well but not being seen to do so.

A member needs analysis and a needs analysis on the publications seems mandatory. you cannot satisfy needs if you do not identify them

Response to member concerns is one of the most important issues. There will be times in a managerial role that you think the request and / or issue raised by a member is just plain dumb. It is important to remember the member thinks it is a valid issue, he / she is your customer, and without customers you do not have a job. Fobbing people off works sometimes but often builds up resentment that can erupt with catastrophic results.

Disputes often occur in organisations. Detailed constitutions, rules, procedures etc must be developed consistently and fairly applied AND seen to be applied with compassion. Sometimes hard decisions have to be made and people will not like it, if processes were seen to be fair that will defuse a lot of the tension.

A Solutions Data Base is an idea with considerable merit.

Regular, short activities with a relevant guest speaker are important.

When wishing to drive significant change in the profession form a project team of representative stakeholders and use change management and project management methodologies. It is wise to give organisation members the opportunity to make comment on the project plan early in the process. Participation=Involvement=Commitment.

Using expert advisers in specialities is important.

It helps to have a credible champion of change and a high profile sponsor for your organisation.

There is a wealth of expertise amongst members that goes untapped, I do not know how to do it but this expertise needs to be surfaced. Unleash the potential of your members.

There will be things the board of management members cannot comment publically on, confidential matters but be conscious of the effect this has on member relations. Minutes of committee meetings can be put on the web site with confidential things removed.

Services to members in remote locations continues to be an issue, I am not sure how to overcome this but I note regional / remote locations seminars are used by some organisations. Technology such as video conferencing, Skype etc. may assist.

Member satisfaction must be constantly monitored.

A new management team needs to acknowledge and thank those prior but not be slow in getting the message across that they see the need for reform and inviting member input on that reform.

7 Appendix 1 -What members say they value in their professional organisations

Informative, responsive to member needs, issues addressed quickly and without fuss, strong support for local chapters, you are not just another number, regular meaningful e-mails, follow up on issues raised, association moves the profession forward, transparent, open, honest communication that promotes valuable discussion, trade shows with conferences valuable, pre and post conference courses good, keeps me up to date, gives practical advice, has influence with government, can get answers to practical problems, have a good time at conferences, like it when conferences and courses involve the audience, get to know people to network with, getting the international perspective from speakers and fellow delegates at conferences is valuable, like it when members get publically recognised, increases the visibility of the profession, good networking, identifies and services the needs of a diverse range of people in the profession, encourages connection and communication between members, having reciprocal arrangements for recognition by equivalent associations overseas, management is accountable to members, has an e-mail address I can direct enquiries to, when I ring I get a quality answer, they thank you for your efforts and for getting in contact with them, not too much time spent telling me how good they are, organisation has credibility and membership helps get a job, large member base, relevant papers on the web site

8 Appendix 2 Major management lesson

As a young Corporal in the Australian Army a Regimental Sergeant Major with a chest full of medals that said he had been there, done that, said to me that that the most important thing in leadership is to look after your private soldiers because you are stuffed (not quite his words) without them.

I would suggest one of the most important things professional associations must do is identify and focus on member needs.

I have carried out extensive research on leadership which can be found in my paper Safety Leadership on ohschange.com.au My belief is that leadership is the often forgotten key to excellence in organisations. Unfortunately leadership is sometimes the refuge of scoundrels.

9 Appendix 3- George's experience with professional associations

I have been a member of 6 professional bodies (OHS, Training & H.R.), one of which has folded and 2 of which were overseas. One overseas organisation had services that were pretty specific to its country of origin and I decided not to stay a member because of this. I joined these in the hope of receiving high quality journals, conferences and courses, basically about learning.

I am tempted to say my membership of the associations has not really done a lot for me personally or professionally but there are some exceptions-

Some reasonable but not earth shattering conferences, I must admit the politicians these tend to attract in order for them to tell you how great a job their particular brand of government is doing annoys the hell out of me. Having attended a Canadian Society of Safety Engineers conference I believe there are some learnings about how to run conferences from them. I have not got there yet but I am impressed by what I perceive to be the very practical focus of the American Society of Safety Engineers conferences.

I learnt a lot about myself personally and professionally from doing the rigid assessment to become a Chartered Fellow of a particular organisation, this was a real highlight for me.

I have found the discussion forums very valuable but I have been very disappointed that what looks like many good ideas raised on a particular forum receive little feedback and / or follow up from management.

A number of members have shown sufficient trust in me that they have opened up to me on a number of relevant issues, I have learnt from this.

I have spoken at a few conferences and had a few papers published, hopefully this has assisted others.

A small number of papers in the publications from various associations have been of practical use.

There have been occasional activities in my home town I have participated in.

I have had some pleasant social gatherings and met some interesting people who have developed into good contacts.

There have probably been other things going on that were not communicated to me well.

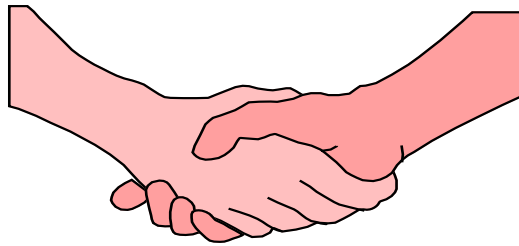
Some of the organisations appear to have the ear of government and big business. I suspect some behind the scenes lobbying for the profession has been happening.

10 Appendix 4 - Organisational Effectiveness Lessons

Guiding principle

INITIATING CHANGE

- When initiating change remember “People support what they create”



Various functions in business eg. Occupational health & safety, Quality, Environment, Learning, Human resources etc. find it difficult to be effective unless there is a climate of general organisation effectiveness in business. To determine where you are going (your objectives) you need to determine where you are at, carry out a gap analysis, talk to both internal and external customers, customer satisfaction is vital. A continuous improvement approach will aid customer satisfaction.

Lesson 1

People judge you by what they see you doing not by what you say you are doing. Treating people with the upmost respect at all times is essential.

Lesson2

It is rare for organisational change to be effective if those affected by the change process are not fully involved in the change process. “When initiating change remember, People support what they create” The 5 P rule is very important in change-Prior Preparation Prevents Poor Performance.

Remember that across any group of people the need for change varies greatly from the 5% of people who have to have the latest technology/ clothes/ systems at any price, through to the much larger group who are happy to accept justifiable change (change that is justified, affordable, and introduced at an acceptable rate); and another large group who don't like change (prefer things to be predictable, constant ...) and another small group of “luddites” who strongly resist change in any form. All these groups have valuable roles in organisations so must not be ignored or bulldozed, otherwise change will be seriously undermined.

Lesson 3

“ Nothing is more central to an organisations effectiveness than its ability to transmit accurate, relevant and understandable information among its members” There is a big difference between saying you have open communications and actually achieving it. Keep all your communications simple.

Keep written communications focussed and succinct. Busy people do not have time to read lengthy documents and busy people do not have time to write them. Always check for understanding.

Where ever possible use face to face communication, it is a big mistake to rely on e-mails for communicating major issues. Frame communications relevant to the receivers work environment.

As a young bloke my Father told me if you are going to be a bull dust artist you have to be incredibly good at it and have a phenomenal memory or you will be found out eventually.

Techniques such as force-field analysis can open up communications channels. Appropriate self-disclosure and reflective listening are an aid to communications and building interpersonal relationships.

Lesson 4

A lack of open communications will inevitably lead to the development of a lack of trust amongst some of the organisations members. Organisation leaders will find when trust goes out the door the perception of their messages will become skewed.

Lesson 5

General Colin Powell is reported as saying you should worry when soldiers no longer come to you with their problems. This is because they have either concluded that you cannot help or you do not care, either is a crisis in leadership.

Lesson 6

General Norman Schwarzkopf said “Failures in leadership are invariably failures in character, not competence” The biggest test of a leader’s ability that he / she will be judged by is how he / she reacts in a crisis.

Lesson7

Do the things that give you the biggest bang for your buck.

Lesson 8

Minimise the bureaucracy and bull dust.

Lesson 9

Do the simplest thing that will work.

Lesson 10

Remember it is the relationships you build combined with your technical skills that determines success – either alone will not guarantee success.

Lesson 11

Have huge but realistic goals with set timelines.

Lesson12

Whatever you do, but particularly learning, must have a needs analysis as a pre-cursor. Encourage your staff to be lifelong learners. Use Action & Experiential learning models and avoid lecture style presentations.

Lesson 13

Communicate your expectations and react when they are not met. Manage by walking around and see for yourself what is going on in your organisation.

Lesson 14

Ask for and give regular feedback.

Lesson15

Focus on the outcome and use team building approaches with your teams.

Note

A Google search should give a basic understanding of terms like force-field analysis, reflective listening, appropriate self-disclosure, action learning and experiential learning.

An ex-manager of mine, who has a way with words, says the trouble with management is that management professionals sometimes engage in acts of public masturbation! I apologise if anyone finds the foregoing offensive but my belief is it is an admittedly crude, but accurate, way of describing some of the things I have seen happen in management.

“People do not care about how much you know until they know how much you care”