



Navigating and Thriving in Leadership: Practical Advice for Elected and Appointed Association Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Elected and appointed association leaders face circumstances that can make professional service challenging. This essay offers practical advice for how association leaders can navigate and thrive in leadership roles as they fulfill their duties and responsibilities. Current and past association leaders offer observations and recommendations for success.

KEYWORDS: leadership, professional service, listening, mentorship, networking

Introduction

As an association leader, you have opportunities to listen (Rappeport & Wolvin, 2020), coach (Maier, 2019), lead with a purpose (Coleman & Gonzalez, 2019), help members feel seen and heard (Atay, 2024), navigate challenges and unforeseen circumstances (Ford, 2023), create avenues for growth (González, 2021), and reflect on lessons learned to envision the future of the association (McBride & Edwards, 2020).

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In this essay, rather than provide advice solely based on my experience in association leadership roles serving as Central States Communication Association Executive Director and Alabama Communication Association President/Conference Planner, I invited academic friends and colleagues to offer tips they would share with elected or appointed association leaders based on their own experiences serving in association leadership roles (e.g., president, conference planner, journal editor, board member). Following each tip, I provide some suggestions about how this tip could be implemented within an association.

Association Leadership Tips

Association Leadership Tip #1: Focus on strengthening the association long-term.

As Liz Sills (Lighthearted Philosophers' Society and Speech Communication Association of South Dakota Past President), Associate Professor at Northern State University, explains: "Servant leadership is a good entry point—it's not about you, it's about leaving the association more successful than you found it."

As an association leader, you have opportunities to create and invest in programming that can strengthen the association long-term. Find ways to engage new members who may not have previously engaged with your association before. At CSCA, we expanded our President's Undergraduate Honors Research Conference call to include extended abstracts and works in progress. This allowed undergraduate students who may be in the earlier stages of a research project to attend the conference and receive feedback on their work.

Invest in the next generation of members through mentorship. At CSCA, we offered Next Leaders Network sessions to early career scholars, students, and first-time conference attendees that provided opportunities for members to learn about the association, interact with association members and leaders, and help shape the future direction of the association. We also hosted virtual office hours sessions where students and faculty members could ask questions from and network with association leaders.

Association Leadership Tip #2: Set aside personal preferences and focus on the bigger picture.

As Kathleen Ranney Bindon (American Accounting Association International Accounting Section Past President), Associate Professor Emerita at the University of Alabama, indicates:

One thing I definitely got better at with experience was when to compromise and when to stand my ground. It's never all about you and it's rarely personal. You're serving for the good of the organization. Personal preferences at times need to be set aside to move things forward. It's not a matter of making your point and "winning." It's a matter of taking the bigger picture perspective and doing what's best for the organization.

As an association leader, you will experience situations where you need to set aside personal preferences and do what is best for the organization. Make changes to existing processes to ensure that the association is moving forward. At CSCA, finding ways to handle the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be challenging. In 2020, the CSCA Executive Committee voted to cancel the conference since we did not have the infrastructure in place to host a virtual conference with existing resources. In 2021, with additional time to research technology options, we offered a fully virtual conference that offered spaces for members to present papers and participate in discussion panels safely from home. In 2022, we returned to in-person conferencing with additional safety protocols in place (e.g., vaccination requirements, testing, social distancing, masking). We also allowed any members who needed to change their conference attendance plans due to health concerns to receive full registration refunds to ensure that members could conference in ways that they felt comfortable with.

Execute association leaders' visions that may or may not be in line with your personal preferences. At CSCA, the 1st Vice President/Conference Planner typically casts the vision for the coming year's conference. I have worked to execute association leaders' visions while remaining cognizant of the site constraints that might limit what we can do. Innovative themes and session types provide both opportunities and challenges. For example, I worked with hotel personnel to create parlor spaces set with soft furniture to cultivate networking among members, identify dance studio spaces that could be used for early morning yoga, build a boutique-style space with garment racks and full-length mirrors for a professional clothing swap, and rent an in-hotel bowling alley to provide a social event for undergraduate students. When possible, I have tried to say yes to association leaders' requests when it is financially possible.

Association Leadership Tip #3: Be a responsible steward of the association's resources.

As Christina S. Beck (Central States Communication Association and National Communication Association Past President, *Communication Yearbook* Past Editor), Professor at Ohio University, advises:

I envisioned myself as someone who needed to be the best possible steward of the association's resources, including, yes, its financial well-being but also its image, reputation, and relationships with its members. That perspective helped me during some difficult moments when I'm not sure that "a" right decision existed, but I sought to make the choice that I felt would serve the association the best.

As an association leader, you will often have fiduciary responsibility which may involve setting an association budget or deciding what initiatives to support financially at the association level. Do your research to identify ways to maximize the association's resources. At the 2021 CSCA virtual conference, we worked to create a virtual conference without a blueprint to guide us in identifying a technology vendor. Finding an affordable technology vendor who would meet all our technology needs took time and patience. I attended multiple demos from different vendors to learn more about available features. I also signed up for free disciplinary and interdisciplinary virtual conferences to experience the conference from the end user side. During a virtual state communication conference, I learned about a vendor that could meet our association's needs at an affordable price

point. After talking to the vendor, we were able to set up a custom site that allowed us to use our existing conference software to build out a virtual conference. This saved us time and money and allowed us to reduce the registration costs so that it was more affordable for members who had limited professional development funding due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Find ways that you can use association resources to reduce financial barriers for members. At CSCA, we worked on creating a discounted membership tier and registration rate for nontenure track/temporary/adjunct members to make membership and registration more affordable. We developed a Faculty Learning Community for doctoral candidates and early career faculty that provided professional development stipends for community members to defray their conference costs. We identified sponsors to support coffee breaks, snack breaks, and breakfasts so we could provide more free food for members during the conference. This helped reduce the food insecurity that can occur in conference hotels with limited affordable food options in the hotel or nearby.

Association Leadership Tip #4: Take accountability for the choices you make in your association role.

As Benjamin R. Bates (Eastern Communication Association Past President, *Communication Quarterly* and *Southern Communication Journal* Past Editor), Professor at Ohio University, suggests:

I think a journal editor has to remember that it's not your journal (it is the association's and the discipline's). That said, a journal editor needs to remember . . . that every piece you include or exclude is a choice you are making and for which you are responsible.

As an association leader, you will have the opportunity to make choices that impact association members and leaders. With that opportunity comes the responsibility to take accountability for the choices you make. As CSCA experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to make some challenging choices regarding what modalities we would offer for the conference. As we transitioned to an in-person conference experience, some members asked CSCA to offer a hybrid conference to increase access for members who could not or did not want to travel due to financial or health concerns. In my role as CSCA Executive Director, I had to make some difficult decisions about how much technology to invest in at each conference hotel space. Although we would have loved to offer enough internet bandwidth to facilitate a hybrid conference experience, we could not afford to pay for the internet bandwidth and staff personnel needed to offer this modality. After reviewing the technology options, I was able to have some frank conversations with association members and leaders regarding why we were making the decisions we were making to only offer an in-person experience and identify other ways we could promote conference accessibility within our budgetary constraints.

In addition to making decisions about the annual budget, I have also had opportunities to participate in the hotel site selection process. Of course, there is no perfect site for a conference, so you must weigh the pros and cons of each site. For example, some sites are more affordable but have less amenities nearby or are more difficult to travel to. Other sites may not be able to offer a preferred date but may be in a location members would be interested in visiting. As CSCA Executive Director, I worked with our Finance Committee to develop a decision matrix where we could

examine past hotel pricing and concessions to identify a site that would best meet the needs of our association and its members. I also invited relevant association leaders to attend the familiarization visits and review proposed hotel contracts so the association could make a well-informed decision.

Association Leadership Tip #5: Identify ways you can contribute your own expertise.

As Kate LaPierre, Instructional Faculty at University of Nevada, Reno, advocates:

I believe we undervalue the benefits of our expertise. My [Federally Qualified Health Care center] board utilizes my knowledge of teaching and training, of marketing and I even helped with the rebranding of our organization. I have no experience with Health Communication but that isn't what they needed from me.

As an association leader, you will enter a new role with expertise gained through previous roles that can help your association. As you review the bylaws for your association that outline the expectations for your appointed or elected leadership role, there will be areas where you will be well-equipped to contribute. Prior to serving as CSCA Executive Director, I had served as the association newsletter editor, a program planner for multiple interest groups, an award committee member, an editorial board member, and an elected member at large. This allowed me to understand many of the leadership roles within our association. I was also able to contribute specific expertise related to program design, advertiser and exhibitor solicitation, convention logistics/site selection, meeting arrangement, newsletter development, business/finance management, record-keeping and dissemination, and website coordination I had gained through association service as well as service to the national association and my university.

It is equally important to identify where you may need to involve others who have expertise you may not have. At CSCA, we work with paid consultants to assist us where we need additional support. For example, we work with a CPA to file our taxes annually, a web developer to maintain and update our association and conference submission websites, and a hotel site selection consultant to help us identify future hotel sites. Although I have some knowledge of business/finance management, website coordination, and convention logistics/site selection, I know I can rely on subject matter experts in those areas to ensure that I am able to successfully complete my association leadership responsibilities.

Association Leadership Tip #6: Identify ways you can seek perspectives and engage members from across the association.

As Christina S. Beck (Central States Communication Association and National Communication Association Past President, *Communication Yearbook* Past Editor), Professor at Ohio University, explains:

Getting to serve as an officer requires the new leader to actively seek perspectives from across the association. . . . Be a good listener and earnestly ask questions. Take the time to learn about the important work that's being done in all areas.

As an association leader, it is important to learn about other parts of the association that you may not have familiarized yourself with in the past. One way you can learn more about the association is to attend business meetings, sessions, and receptions that are sponsored by units across the association. These conference events offer opportunities to listen to and ask questions from association members. Learning more about what priorities are important to different units can help build new relationships and inform future association planning, programming, and priorities.

Another way you can seek perspectives and engage members is to invite groups of members to participate in focus group sessions. At CSCA, we invite different groups of stakeholders together to learn more about their perspectives. Newcomers may be looking to learn how to get involved with the association. Undergraduate students may be interested in meeting senior scholars or learning more about master's programs. Graduate students may be looking to learn more about doctoral programs or want help navigating the academic job market. Past officers might be looking for ways to give back to the association or mentor more junior scholars. Gathering these groups together can provide insights into what the association is doing well and where there is still room to grow.

Association Leadership Tip #7: Cultivate professional networks that support colleagues.

As Katherine S. Thweatt (Eastern Communication Association Past President), Associate Professor at State University of New York, Oswego, explains, "Service is extremely rewarding and offers a way to support colleagues in their successes. It is professional development that creates professional networks. These networks provide opportunities for connecting students and colleagues."

As an association leader, it is important to find ways to help colleagues cultivate professional networks. Although associations at their best offer unique opportunities to build and strengthen professional networks, sometimes new members can find conferences to be overwhelming especially if they do not have a professional network prior to the conference. At CSCA, we try to offer spaces where newcomers can mingle with association members in a setting that is conducive to building new network connections. This space might be an association-wide reception held at the beginning of the conference that introduces attendees to the host hotel or host city. This space could also be a networking session held during the conference at the association-wide or unit level.

Another way you can help colleagues cultivate their professional networks is through mentoring initiatives. This could mean matching senior scholars with junior scholars at the association-wide or unit level. This could also mean matching conference attendees with similar interests to foster collaboration opportunities. These mentoring initiatives can occur prior to the conference to help prepare conference attendees for what they might expect, during the conference to help conference attendees feel more comfortable, or following the conference to strengthen connections made at the conference throughout the year.

Association Leadership Tip #8: Utilize professional networks to assist you in your association leadership role.

As Joann Keyton (*Journal of Applied Communication Research* and *Small Group Research* Past Editor, Vice-President of Interdisciplinary Network of Group Research), Distinguished Professor Emerita at North Carolina State University notes:

Learn from others. Seek advice or comments from those in front of you and those behind you. Good ideas come from different places. You will not be expected to know everything, but you can become an expert as to where information resides.

As an association leader, professional service can sometimes seem like a lonely endeavor especially when you are engaging in invisible labor that might not be fully recognized or appreciated by association members and leaders. Time-intensive roles can often lead to burnout which can impact your ability to perform your responsibilities effectively. When you are serving in a leadership role, it can be helpful to have a professional network of past association leaders who understand the demands of serving in your role. This professional network can provide advice or a sounding board when you are navigating the challenges that might come with your role.

Association leadership may also provide opportunities to invite other scholars to engage in professional service opportunities that can lighten the load of leadership. These professional service opportunities can be beneficial for association members who may be looking for a way to get more involved or interested in taking on an association leadership role in the future. As an association leader, it is also important to prioritize the essential responsibilities that only you can perform. There may also be responsibilities that can be delegated to other association leaders or members who may have subject matter expertise in these areas. In some cases, it may make sense to hire a paid consultant or professional staff member to assist with responsibilities that are outside the expertise area of association leaders and members.

Association Leadership Tip #9: Organize and protect institutional knowledge.

As Lindsey Sherrill (Alabama Communication Association Vice President), Assistant Professor at University of North Alabama, suggests:

My biggest advice is to get organized in a way that protects institutional knowledge. One group I served in has shared cloud storage (outside of the official organization) that is updated and accessible to each new leadership team. It's been very easy to see calendars, minutes, [and] bylaw changes. . . . This made leadership transitions seamless and effective. By contrast, working with groups who don't have an accessible repository of institutional knowledge has been far less effective and much more frustrating.

As an association leader, it is important to organize and protect institutional knowledge so future leaders can carry on the work of the association. One easy way to do this is to build in a shadowing period for new officers to learn the role. This could include inviting newly elected officers to committee meetings or having a new officer shadow an existing officer to learn more about the role and responsibilities. If current leaders keep good records regarding processes and procedures, this can make the transition or shadow period easier.

Technology can also facilitate opportunities to organize and protect institutional knowledge. This could involve digitizing historical records in archives or saving digital copies of bylaws and minutes so that they are readily available to future leaders. This could also mean saving email correspondence or copying new officers so they have a sense of what type of correspondence they may

receive in the future. Current officers might also pass down records via cloud-based storage so new officers can find information they need for their role.

Navigating and Thriving in Leadership

When you are appointed or elected to serve in an association leadership role, it can often feel like you are venturing into the unknown (Wang, 2022), because you are not aware of what challenges and circumstances you will face as you serve your association. Although association leadership can be stressful, navigating and thriving in leadership can be possible when you collaborate with your association community and remain focused on the big picture: the association's mission and the association leaders and members you have been appointed or elected to serve.

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