

Are you a “Representative For”..., or a “Representative of”...?

Transparency and trust in governance occurs when board members understand the difference between being a “representative for...” versus a “representative of...”. If board members believe they are “representative for,” then they see themselves as the elected representatives of a particular constituency. They voice only the self-interests and opinions of that constituency, and vote only on behalf of that constituency’s interests.

Alternatively, those board members who view their role as ensuring that the views, beliefs, values and self interests of the constituencies they know best are on the table as part of the conversation, are “representative of”. The difference, therefore, of the terms “representative for” and “representative of”, is subtle but very significant. Those board members who are “representatives of” ensure that other board members are informed of the views of the constituencies that they understand best. They participate in a collective dialogue, deliberation and decision-making based on what is in the best interests of the whole organization itself.

Leaders who are part of national governance bodies by virtue of their role in local or provincial governance must have a particularly clear understanding of the foregoing distinction. Leadership’s role in this case is to represent the best interests of the organization’s chair they are sitting in at the moment. This is what is otherwise referred to as the “tush-test”. When on the national Board, their fiduciary responsibility is to that Board; when on the local or provincial Board their fiduciary responsibility is to that organization. On both boards, their role is to be “representative of”, not “representative for”. It is because our Group Presidents have tended to be “representatives for”, that we continue to struggle with challenges that are eroding the very fabric of the association. This shortfall in our governance process needs immediate repair; hence, our decision to hold a formal governance and orientation session during the most recent AGM.

In March 2005 the Pacific Group President provided 808 Wing with the idea of converting Regular members to Associates. Clearly, the Group President was serving as a “representative for”. The aim, it now seems, was for 808 Wing to find a way to retain more revenues at the Wing level. This move essentially turned 808 Wing into a “for-profit” chapter of a “Not-for-Profit” association. While the leaders involved may have at one time promised on first joining the association to uphold the aims and objects of the Air Force Association of Canada, the incident at 808 Wing shows these leaders have grown very selective with their allegiances. No more proof of this claim is necessary, once anyone reads the letter written by the current 808 Wing President.

The proper response to this situation must involve a process that explains to 808 Wing, and the rest of the association, why such an approach cannot and does not serve the interests of the association the aims and objects for which members supposedly agreed to at the time of joining. The NEC’s response must also inform all participants of the alternatives; if other Wings

want to follow the 808 Wing example the NEC must explain to those Wings how to go about doing so, and what the costs to the association would be. In other words, Wings and the Wing members in question must benefit from a transparent governance effort on the part of their elected members that explains what happened, not hide it. Any other approach to this event will not engender trust on the part of the members in their elected body of representatives. The damage to that trust has already occurred; whether the NEC chooses to repair that damage is now the issue at hand.