

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

I joined the Air Force Association of Canada in 1993. I happened to be on the receiving end of a campaign being waged by air force leaders to encourage serving members to join the association. In retrospect, the resulting uptake of members was relatively impressive: more than 2,400 individuals joined the association in less than 18 months. At no other time in the 60-year history of the association has the uptake been this successful.

A short while later the government determined that the Air Force Association of Canada was not eligible for accommodations, office supplies, telephones and other kinds of support, at public expense. Consequently, the association was evicted from government facilities, and the sum-total of financial support lost was approximately \$160,000 annually. The MAL membership numbers began to fall shortly thereafter, and have continued to fall ever since. Something needed to be done to stem the outflow. The National Executive Council confronted these new realities and began to make decisions so as to cut costs, while at the same time raise membership dues.

The foregoing context is important because it helps to explain the NEC actions that followed, and the consequences. One of the first decisions involved the elimination of Regional Directors in favour of raising Group Presidents to the NEC level. This was a good decision, from a financial perspective, but it was very poorly executed from a governance perspective. Once Regional Directors were eliminated travel costs for those directors were no longer a factor. As new members of the NEC, however, Group Presidents discovered they were being asked to travel just as much as their Regional Director Predecessors had been, but without reimbursement. Group Presidents were told to draw their funding from the capitation grant the association had been providing Groups all along. Unfortunately, the loss of the CanadaPost PAP grant (\$14,000) led to the next NEC decision – elimination of the capitation grant. A compromise was reached, though, when the association decided to fund Group President national travel expenses incurred. Regrettably, this did nothing to solve the real problem – governance.

Elimination of the capitation grant to this day remains an unpopular decision. Dispute over this issue, while seemingly confined to only one Group, exposed a serious governance-related issue. As bona fide national directors Group Presidents were supposed to have assumed the mantle or responsibilities which had been assigned to their predecessors – the Regional Directors. In other words, they were supposed to be representatives of the air force association of Canada, at the Group level. Regrettably, Group Presidents received no special training or counselling, as regards the requirement to abandon their previous mantle – being a representative for their constituents. The Group Presidents simply stepped up to the national level but confined their outlook to something they had been familiar with – being representatives for their constituents. The Air Force Association of Canada implemented an important governance change (replacing Regional Directors with Group Presidents) for financial reasons, but gave little to no thought for the impact from a governance perspective on

the Group Presidents. Perhaps not surprisingly, four years after the change one of the Group Presidents admitted that he had no idea he was actually a member of the association's board of directors (NEC).

For as long as this issue goes unaddressed we can expect Group Presidents to act as representatives for their constituents, rather than representatives of the association. Their issues and arguments will be parochial, and many will go unresolved. They will find themselves working at cross-purposes, with the association, and trust and transparency will suffer. Groups will grow more insular and the association will begin to see Groups as sub-organizations that directly compete with the association for funding and attention. Members and prospective members will then become confused – are they members of a Group, or are they members of the association? Is the association supporting Groups, or is the other way around? Is lack of support related to mission ineffectiveness, or are there other issues at play? These questions and a lack of understanding will only confuse members and prospective members. This, more than anything else, helps to explain the precipitous membership decline since 1999.

Transparency and trust in governance occur 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.

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”, in this case, as his primary and laudable goal was to help one of his Wings.

The aim, it now seems, was for 808 Wing to find a way to retain more revenues at the Wing level. Unfortunately, this kind of policy-based issue deserved to be raised to the NEC so that a decision could be rendered that could lead to equal application across the association. That did not happen. Consequently, 808 Wing turned into a “for-profit” chapter of a “Not-for-Profit” association.

The proper response to this situation should involve a process that explains to 808 Wing why such an approach cannot possibly serve all of the interests of the association. The NEC’s response must also inform others 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.

In the aftermath, to their credit the national executive council has decided to come to a better understanding of the importance of effective governance and leadership. A governance session was held during the Trenton Annual General Meeting in 2009, attended by members of the NEC, advisors and a small number of other participants. A “Policies and Procedures” Manual has begun to take form, containing the 2009 work of the NEC on governance. Problems will not disappear, however, until this governance training takes root at the Wing levels. Group Presidents will continue to struggle with their “Representative of” versus “Representative for” work for as long as those who make the greatest demands on the Group Presidents – the Wing Presidents and Group Regional Vice-Presidents – remain uninformed of these important governance-related matters. The solution to this challenge involves leadership – the National President and members of the NEC will need to encourage maximum participation of Wing representatives in this kind of training.

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