

## ▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



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In my last column (Part 1 of this two-part discussion), I talked about the importance of relevance. I shared my deeply held belief that for the foreseeable future, successful organizations will be those that maintain an unrelenting commitment to being relevant. I also noted that if an organization commits to staying relevant, it also commits to making an uncomfortable journey that will involve many swings and zigzags. Such a course reflects the simple fact that relevance exists as one of those ever-moving targets. You can't remain relevant if you are unwilling to change your course when ideas change about what is relevant.

I contrasted this method of steering (an organization) with the much more mechanistic and intuitively comfortable practice of classical strategic planning. This approach offers the illusions of both progress and security by training our eyes on seemingly reachable targets (e.g., goals and objectives) while giving us rails to hold onto (timeframes, mapping techniques, and performance evaluations) during the journey into the future.

Long ago, I cast my lot with the wild ride promised by the quest to remain relevant. (As I discussed in my last column, old-time strategic planning has been increasingly discredited for its vain effort to control the future and for its inflexibility and attendant inability to seize opportunities.) I am also proud to say that over the past 28 years, NEHA has grown in stature, size, and influence. From a budget back then of \$280,000, we aim to close this year with well over \$5.5 million in revenues and more contacts and relationships with other NGOs and governmental agencies than at any time in NEHA's history. I attribute this compelling success

## The Quest to Be Relevant and the Results of Our Efforts

### Part 2—Examples

*No, life works in a way where we tune into change and then respond accordingly.*

story most of all to our board's commitment to keep NEHA relevant to the interests of both this profession and the people who practice it.

I spent my last column laying out the intellectual framework for the case for being relevant. I also promised that in my follow-up column (Part 2) I would share specific examples of how going with the flow has helped NEHA retain our relevance and stay true to our commitment to be of value to both you—the environmental health practitioner—and the profession itself. So here goes!

What is relevant is often found lurking behind trends or standing in the middle of unexpected developments. To remain relevant, it is therefore important to monitor trends and developments and to continually consider if something in that trend or development has meaning for you (i.e., the organization). If a strong "yes" answer emerges from these musings, it is probably wise to consider what you need to do differently to align with these new considerations.

Taking only the last several years into account, we have noticed a good number of trends and developments that we believe mean something to the people and profession

we represent. We have quickly responded in ways designed to preserve our reputation for relevance. Some of those trends and developments, along with the responses we've undertaken, can be summarized as follows.

- A growing migration in reading preferences from print to digital led to
  - » more NEHA e-newsletters to deliver useful information to you,
  - » the development of an online platform to allow Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition attendees to interact with each other in a vibrant electronic community,
  - » enhanced development of our membership and credentialing databases to enable members to more easily (and electronically) access their records and even update them, and
  - » provision of a large library of electronic course offerings that credentialed people can access for continuing education (CE) credit (for no cost).
- A growing interest, especially among younger professionals, in interactive methods of education led to
  - » the development and implementation of an extensive interactive learning track of education (learning laboratories) at the AEC & Exhibition.
- Increased budgetary pressures wiping out CE budgets, causing reductions in force, and causing existing staff to have to take on more work (often for less pay) led to
  - » the development and provision of a way for people to access our AEC & Exhibition "virtually" at a cost savings,

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- » a waiver of dues for unemployed members,
  - » a commitment to open up job opportunities for environmental health professionals in topic areas such as sustainability, healthy communities, and even global climate change,
  - » a commitment to help environmental health programs better understand and impact budgeting processes,
  - » a provision of a complete library of CE electronic course offerings that are now available for absolutely no cost to those professionals who must meet credential CE requirements, and
  - » a demonstration to employers that attending the AEC & Exhibition is more than worth the investment. We have committed to rebuilding our AEC & Exhibition around return on investment (ROI) principles. We are determined to show that for every dollar spent attending our conference, the attendee will more than earn that in return through the cost savings and revenue enhancements that they learned from our conference. (In fact, NEHA is going to be featured as a case study in a soon-to-be-released book on meetings and ROI.) We implemented our first ROI-based AEC & Exhibition this year in Albuquerque.
  - In our high-tech and low-touch modern society, people are seeking a greater sense of community. This development led to
    - » building up a presence in social networking that allows our members to connect with each other in stimulating virtual communities,
    - » exploring ways to open up more volunteer opportunities within NEHA, and
    - » looking into a new e-newsletter that is community focused.
  - The issue of food safety exploding as a major national issue led to
    - » NEHA's involvement in a wide range of partnerships and coalitions all having to do with the topic of food safety in some way,
    - » NEHA's involvement with various policy makers and policy-making agencies of government to an unprecedented degree, and
    - » NEHA's increase in coverage of food safety issues in the *JEH*, the AEC & Exhibition, our Web site, our e-newsletter, and our credentials.
  - After the earthquake in Haiti, a number of members contacted NEHA looking for ways to volunteer to help with environmental health issues emerging in the earthquake's aftermath, which led to
    - » learning how the process for volunteering worked and developing explanations that we shared with people interested in volunteering.
  - Various NEHA state affiliates have run into proposed legislation that runs counter to environmental health interests and have turned to NEHA for support. This led to
    - » NEHA very quickly preparing policy positions and/or papers and submitting them to the appropriate legislative bodies before any final policy actions were taken. (We've been advised that these inputs have helped to stop these legislative initiatives.)
  - Interest and local funding support have developed for new programs in the topic areas of sustainability and healthy communities. These programs hold potential for significant involvement for environmental health, which led to
    - » highlighting these topics in the *JEH* and the AEC & Exhibition to enable our profession to become more aware of an environmental health role in each,
    - » working on building bridges to job opportunities for environmental health professionals in these emerging fields of practice, especially as many people in environmental health are losing their jobs, and
    - » co-locating the AEC & Exhibition next year with a professional society that is all about sustainability.
  - Organizations are increasingly being held accountable to become more green and more sustainable, which led to
    - » working hard to increase green and sustainable practices in our office operation, and
    - » investing substantial time and effort to make our AEC & Exhibition greener and greener.
- The lesson from this illustrative list (which by the way, could have gone on and on), is that none of these activities were planned! Rather, as we recognized that certain trends and developments had meaning for this association and the people we represent, we quickly committed both staff time and financial support to do something about them.
- I know that some of my friends who continue to cling to strategic planning 101 would argue that any plan worth its weight allows

for an evaluative or updating component. These evaluations usually involve some kind of environmental scan that allows the plan's authors to adjust to take into account new circumstances or new developments.

My response is that these exercises are usually done in a time-specific way (such as by every March 1). By the time this annual update is conducted, it is often too late to jump on a trend or respond to a development. The world of 2010 just moves too fast and it waits for no one! Even worse, such a system imparts to its followers the dangerous fiction that somehow the calm and rational organization can remain in control. Life doesn't work that way! Most of the time, we follow change; we do not lead it. As I said in my first column, life emerges; it is not planned. Tell the airline industry when oil skyrocketed to \$150 a barrel in a matter of months that it could wait until its next planning cycle to deal with that little development! No, life works in a way where we tune into change and then respond accordingly. As I said in my previous column, find me one person who is doing today what they thought they would be doing even a year ago.

NEHA doesn't do a strategic plan update once a year. We do a strategic issues update every day. That's the difference. That's the NEHA way. And that's the whole point of my time spent detailing this story. I think it's important that NEHA members know this distinguishing characteristic of how their association works.

A member writes us and articulates a need. A federal agency issues a new draft regulation that could impact our profession. An event occurs such as the earthquake in Haiti and members want to volunteer to help. A state affiliate runs into a legislative issue and they need NEHA's help. In all cases, to the extent that our resources allow, we respond. That's the culture we've developed. It is also, in my mind, the prime reason for why we have grown as we have. Our credo is to turn on a dime if that is what it takes to remain relevant to this profession and the issues it faces.

By presenting the story in full (Parts 1 and 2), I hope I've helped you better understand how your leaders have both groomed and grown your association. I also hope that this increases the pride that you as a member have in your professional society. As I often say, we want you to be proud of NEHA! If you're not, we haven't done our jobs. 🐶

