

► **DirecTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

I'm delighted to formally introduce you to Jonna Ashley, NEHA's new membership manager. Jonna's fingerprints are quickly being felt throughout the organization as we strive to become the most essential and influential environmental health association in the world. Her aim to "create or strengthen channels for environmental health professionals to connect" will be a central feature of our efforts going forward.

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I joined my first association when I was 23 years old. A recent college graduate and living by myself in Washington, DC, I was looking to build a professional network and add some real-world experience to my meager résumé. What I found was a group of people who provided not only professional opportunities but also support, advice, and even friendship. I found my tribe.

It was this group of people who bolstered me when I wanted to do the unthinkable and start a new career at the onset of the 2008 recession. It was this group that gave me my first encounters with event planning, marketing, and most significantly, membership. These connections and opportunities happened in meeting rooms and through social media. They also took place over dinners and impromptu happy hours after long days at work. In some of these connections I played the role of the mentor and in others I was

What Is the Value of Membership?

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a sponge absorbing knowledge and experiences. Each connection, however, created value. These interactions made me a better person and a better advocate for my industry.

Since joining that first association, the Women's Information Network, I have gone on to participate in several other professional and cause-based associations as a member, a volunteer, and an employee. I have come to believe that the true value of membership is in finding a group of people who understand how you spend your days and encourage you to seek growth and further your mission. I believe that we are stronger, and can do more, together. After all, strength in connection is the reason that associations were originally founded.

Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the 1835 book *Democracy in America*, is generally considered the first spokesperson for the work of associations. In his treatise on associations, he states, "As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce in the world, they seek each other out; and when they have found each other, they unite. From then on, they are no longer isolated men, but a power one sees from afar, whose actions serve as an example; a power that speaks, and to which one listens."

These days, with improvements in technology and for-profit companies increasing their interest in membership-based business models, it is possible for people to connect and achieve collective action with greater ease. Associations have been challenged to respond strategically, particularly in the area of membership, where they are being asked to demonstrate a return on dues investment.

I can easily display the positive return on investment for NEHA membership dues, but that falls short of revealing the true value of membership. When we go down the road of operating association membership like a business, seeing our members as customers who we need to attach sales metrics to, we miss the mark on what it means to be a member of a professional association. Amazon has members. Netflix has members. If I feel that I have saved money or time using these services, I will happily renew for another year, but I have no stake or alliance to Amazon

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or Netflix. If I am offered a better deal elsewhere, I will go easily. The relationship that associations garner with their members is something different.

NEHA is not in the business of selling. We are in the business of connecting and working toward a common purpose, which can never be fully analyzed on a return on investment (ROI) calculator. I cannot tell you how much money I have saved over the years by being a member of the associations I am affiliated with. What I can tell you are the names of the people I have met through these associations who I consider to be my collaborators and my community.

To that end, it is my goal as NEHA's membership manager to create or strengthen channels for environmental health professionals to connect. I will be looking at ways for you, as members, to find each other, share ideas, and ultimately, be strengthened in your unity. Some of these channels will be virtual, such as an online member directory, enabling you to seek each other out across the country and internationally. Some channels will be good old fashioned face-to-face interaction, such as developing programs and events for students and young professionals to connect at our Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition. I also hope to facilitate these vital face-to-face interactions through strengthening NEHA's affiliates so that members have more opportunities to establish robust local networks.

My aim is to increase the number of NEHA members so that we can be, as Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "a power that speaks, and to which one listens." I believe that associations are uniquely suited for this job as long as we can demonstrate our true value. That value will not be defined in business terms like ROI or dues revenue, but in uniting members so they might find their tribe.

My intention is not to take on NEHA membership in isolation. I would like to hear your recommendations and thoughts about creating something I found so long ago, a place to find support, advice, and yes, even friendship. Please reach out to me at jashley@neha.org. 🐼

Did You Know?

The holiday season is coming up! Please note that NEHA's office will be closed for Thanksgiving on November 23 and 24. The office will be closed for the holidays on December 25–January 1. If you have any end-of-the-year business with us, make sure to contact us prior to December 25.

2018

ACCEPTING NOMINATIONS NOW

Walter S. Mangold Award

The Walter S. Mangold Award recognizes an individual for extraordinary achievement in environmental health. Since 1956, this award acknowledges the brightest and best in the profession. NEHA is currently accepting nominations for this award by an affiliate in good standing or by any five NEHA members, regardless of their affiliation.

The Mangold is NEHA's most prestigious award and while it recognizes an individual, it also honors an entire profession for its skill, knowledge, and commitment to public health.

**Nomination deadline is
March 15, 2018.**



To access the online application, visit www.neha.org/about-neha/awards/walter-s-mangold-award.