

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

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

Windmills and Calder Mobiles

Don Quixote's irrational assault on windmills is interpreted by some as a metaphor for the impractical pursuit of an idealistic goal. What author Miguel de Cervantes had in mind is anyone's guess. There are days I feel like Don Quixote, uncertain if the giants are real or imaginary.

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has enjoyed a healthy, albeit uneven, growth trajectory for the last 4 years. As our current fiscal year (FY) draws to a close, our organization operates with a reasonable margin. We anticipate net revenue on our \$10 million FY2019 budget, which means we can pay our bills with some money left over for the rainy day fund. This attainment is what a competent management team does and is an important step toward a sustainable future.

If we unpack this year's revenue structure, I'm projecting that membership dues will comprise around 5% of our budget. In other words, for every \$1 in dues, we attract roughly \$19 in alternate sources of revenue. That \$19 is your NEHA staff at work—writing, submitting, and administering grants; designing and hosting the Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition; managing credentials; and producing this *Journal*, among other products and services in support of the environmental health profession. The lion's share of our income is derived from grants and contracts, money that waxes and wanes. We're delighted when we have it and grieve when opportunities pass us by. Right now we're enjoying a surge of monetary resources because of targeted federal invest-

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ments. We anticipate, however, for the flow to taper back effective September 2020.

We're also enjoying an increase in membership. In 2015 we recorded around 4,200 individual members. Today that number hovers above 6,300. That's a 50% increase. Our membership department—Jonna Ashley, association membership manager, and Alexis Nally, member services representative—have delivered exceptional growth. We are thankful for them and their leadership.

There's good evidence that we're amid a modest association revival. On most days it feels downright revolutionary. Therein lies the conundrum. A careful study of history suggests revolutions attract three personality types: thinkers, doers, and opportunists. As I write this column, we have six open positions. Once filled that will bring our ranks of employed to almost 50. How do we ensure that the right balance of thinkers and doers selectively join our staff? This question is more than abstract. Our Washington, DC, staff is currently at five employees, a number that gives me pause.

In parallel with the organizational growth lies an expanded sense of expectation of

us. I am asked with increasing frequency to direct a portion of our association energy and resources to environmental issues that are not threaded to environmental health workforce priorities. Many of these issues represent things for which I am passionate: air pollution, firearms, vaccinations, occupational health and safety. These are noble initiatives but in most cases are not directly aligned with our mission.

So, I'm feeling a little fragile. How do we harness the substantial momentum we've generated and ensure we find the right people to join our team? And while we have made substantial progress in several performance metrics, I now spend more time contemplating the "so what" and much less time on the "what."

I am a believer in people's talents and less a believer in their degrees and credentials. Succinctly, I believe in the who, not the what. Some of the most productive individuals I've worked with had bachelor's degree, not master or doctoral degrees. There are three basic talents that I'm looking for in our new hires.

Talent Type #1: Someone who can cultivate and build relationships. After 30 some years in public health, I continue to be impressed by what happens through networking. The phone call. The e-mail. The text message. The whisper. The postconference conversation. The most meaningful intelligence is not from an article, a tweet, or a blog. It generally comes from someone I've worked with or known over the years. When people within an organization know and trust each other and authentically celebrate each other's suc-

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Environmental Law Institute's Emerging Leaders Initiative, and am a member of the National Recreation and Park Association's Climate and Health Advisory Panel. Outside of work, I enjoy time with my family and dabble in photography and graphic design.

Since becoming a NEHA member in 2015, NEHA's members, staff, programs, and activities have inspired me and afforded me opportunities to become a stronger environmental health professional. Because of that, I am all the more grateful to serve NEHA through my position.



Joyce Dieterly

I began working at NEHA in November 2018 when I was hired on as evaluation coordinator. My role centers around assessing and strengthening the quality and impact of NEHA's work. This past year I have conducted program evaluation on funded projects supporting hurricane preparedness, response, and recovery. After serving as a Peace Corps

volunteer in Mozambique, I discovered a passion for public health, went back to school, and received my Master of Public Health from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Though it was through on-the-job learning, I found that evaluation allowed me to work with data while telling a story about the long-lasting impacts of public and environmental health programs.

I was able to continue learning from evaluation experts during my time as an Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE) fellow at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, working with national heart disease and stroke prevention programs. After about 2 years, I made the move to Denver to begin working at NEHA and have enjoyed the opportunity to discover exciting things the area has to offer, including taking my dog out on the trails that run through the city.

As I am approaching 1 year with NEHA, I am looking forward to finding ways we can continually improve, as well as work with internal and external partners to build evaluation capacity across the association. I am excited to apply my evaluation expertise to the field of environmental health and ensure that the work we are doing is beneficial, useful, and impactful. 🐾

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cesses, everything else happens organically. Relationships matter.

Talent Type #2: Someone who is intellectually engaged and applies themselves. Notice I didn't say smart. The world is rife with bright people who don't fully apply their talents productively or never seem to finish their work or finish on time. I believe organizations that try more things are more successful. Period. We benefit from a blend of employees who are linear thinkers and those who are more eclectic. We then figure out how to maximize the juice of both types, preferably in the same room at the same time.

Talent Type #3: Someone who is switched on. This characteristic is an intrinsic human quality that I can't figure out if it's inherent in the individual, a timing issue, or trickles to surface through organizational culture. This kind of person genuinely cares about members, their member experiences, and goes the extra step without being cajoled to meet that need. I was in Puerto Rico a couple weeks ago in support of our workforce efforts when a department of health employee gushed about the personal and individualized treatment



The National Environmental Health Association staff on July 24, 2019. Photo courtesy of Santiago Ezcurra

she received at our 2019 AEC in Nashville, Tennessee. That's what I'm talking about.

We have experienced rapid growth over the last 4 years and it is unlikely we can maintain this rate into perpetuity. This dynamic environment has introduced amazing opportunities for us to demonstrate leadership. At the same time, let's embrace the truth that there are few opportunities to achieve great things. I believe now is one of those opportunities. By hiring the wrong people, organizations

sized similar to ours tend to be like Calder Mobiles, you touch one part and the entire apparatus bounces and jiggles. This response is great if you are an infant experimenting with the effects of tactile stimulation but not so much if the machinery is firing on all cylinders, as it is for us now. 🐾

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