

# Feeling the Tug?

## Managing the Tensions that Pull Leaders in Different Directions

By Terry Paulson

At a screenwriting class in Los Angeles, instructor Robert McKee told a struggling student not to take a side job writing leadership training films. Without hesitation, McKee cautioned: “Don’t touch them! It’ll ruin your writing. Hollywood is into taking advantage of tension. Training films are into giving answers. That’s why they’re so boring!”

Like the movies, leading associations is anything but boring, and sustaining excellence has less to do with simple answers and more to do with managing equal, seemingly conflicting forces. Master the following nine dynamic tensions and they will give you a leadership edge for years to come.

### **Celebrate Progress *and* Build a Dynasty of Excellence**

Let’s start with an unsettling truth: Change is never over. Volunteer leaders often want to get something done in their year—they want closure. But you should never settle for a good year. Instead, build a sustainable dynasty that keeps raising the bar on excellence and expanding value for your members.

Movies capitalize on our need for closure, but life in associations is more like a soap opera—where there’s never closure. Learn to celebrate the milestones of progress every year, but continue to use that progress as a launching pad for continuing change.



Your members have to battle formidable competitors every day, forever, without a break. You should expect the same. The best way to thrive in the future is to be part of the team that keeps creating it. You won't find a slow lane in today's never-ending change journey. There's no reverse or off switch, and you have to fix all flat tires while moving. So never promise closure after the next change. Be honest: "We're never going to be done. Be excited; you'll never be bored again!"

### **Take the Best From Tradition and Change**

While it's true that every improvement is the result of change, not every change is an improvement. The past and tradition will always have value, but they shouldn't have an automatic veto. Take the best from tradition and the best from innovation to invent the new good old days for your association.

Don't shy away from the tension that this creates. Use it. Instead of silencing critics, seek them out as sounding boards for possible changes. Keep your change agents and your status-quo seekers talking to get the best out of both. Neither has a lock on truth.

### **Sell the Need for Change by Using Fear and Hope**

Thomas Gibson observed, "People only change when confronted with strong leadership, crisis, or both. Therefore, unless you are willing to be at the whim of crises, strong leadership is the only reliable change force you have." When you wait for a crisis to be your catalyst for change, you seldom have the resources or the time to do it well. But without a crisis as impetus, you have the challenge of finding ways to motivate others to change.

Fear and hope are complementary motivators. Courageous leaders unfreeze the status quo before they announce any strategic change—they create anticipation, like the music in a movie. As association executives, be the

music for your people. Use the tension created by both threats and opportunities to sell the need for change early.

### **Drive a Compelling and Flexible Vision**

Everything you do as an association executive should reflect strategy—you should focus more on opportunity management than you do on operations management. With clear crystal balls in short supply, forge, communicate, and drive a fuzzy but strategic focus. An imperfect 15 degrees of focus is more important than waiting for the perfect plan that never comes. As your association changes, you'll receive feedback that allows for constructive course correction.

Sell your vision in every meeting and communication you provide. The biggest difference between a vision and a hallucination is the number of people who can see it. It's repetition that drives your vision, mission, and values—communicate, communicate, and communicate again.

Of course there will be obstacles and errors on the road to strategic change. But optimism and hope are nurtured by a track record of overcoming obstacles on the way to successful results. Don't wait for the perfect plan; do your due diligence and get moving. Take the advice of hockey great Wayne Gretzky's early coach: "You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take."

Make it safe to surface errors. The earlier you risk and make those errors, the sooner you can turn them into useful experience. True winners in the great game of strategic change win and lose more frequently than the losers, because they get in and stay in the game. Encourage quick action, early processing of errors, constant process improvement, and strategic risk taking as you move radically into the future.

Use your successes by letting the commitment and enthusiasm of your people be contagious. Find the stories that capture and promote how your association's changes are working. Good success stories are a rich reser-

voir of enthusiasm, best practices, and wisdom. Watch the enthusiasm spread when you share positive gossip about the people in your association who are making change work.

### **Value Experience and Lifelong Learning**

The education function of associations continues to increase in importance. Author and management visionary Peter Drucker observed, "The fastest growth industry in the U.S. will soon be continuing education of adults because things are changing so fast in every field and occupation." The age of lifelong employment and secure professions is over, and there is a compelling need for targeted, competency-based training that will enhance the competitive advantage of every member.

Associations will either help their members move from obsolescence to relevance or those associations will cease to exist. Associations must balance the need to value and honor their best while challenging everyone to keep learning and reinventing their careers. If your people have the skills to match the future, they'll do well—but there's no future in sending around resumes for skills that are no longer needed. An association committed to lifelong learning is its members' best insurance policy. Make sure that commitment shows in all you do.

### **Be Tight and Loose**

You can't do it all and retain strategic excellence. A sign in the California state finance department describes the reality most associations face: "Nothing inspires genius like a tight budget." But in this age of cost containment, staff are getting tired of hearing about more with less.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter of Harvard Business School writes, "Excellent companies are very tight and very loose." Most organizations are either tight or loose. When things are going well, they are loose all over: "If you need money for equipment, buy it. You need people, hire them." Then when things get

tight, they get tight all over. "You need money? Take up a collection; it works well in the airports. You need people? Have children; they will grow."

Be tight *and* loose. Be tight everywhere you can be tight and loose wherever you can add strategic value to the members you serve. Prioritize and focus your resources and investments where they count most. In short, the old message was more with less. Today, it's do the right thing with less. Be focused, be flexible, and get everyone working smart on real priorities that are worth doing.

When inadequate resources exist, make it safe to surface problems and make necessary priority shifts. On strategic projects, keep asking, "Are there any red flags for which we should adjust?"

### Value Empowerment *and* Limits

Without clear objectives and boundaries, empowerment can be an invitation to anarchy. Empowerment is important, but it is not a blank check. One overempowered employee or volunteer can bring down your association. Manage the tension between encouraging involvement and establishing necessary limits.

Author Robert Waterman defines "empowerment" as directed autonomy. People are encouraged to do things their way but within a context of direction. Be very, very clear about your strategic goals, your mission, and any limits teams must work within. Then, step back to give your people the time and latitude to make change work.

In successful associations, trust is earned. If you don't trust your specific staff or volunteers, you won't and shouldn't empower them. Structure your projects with enough checkpoints for you to gain trust and for the people involved to gain confidence in their work.

### Care Enough to Confront *and* Support

Management guru Tom Peters gets to the heart of this tension: "We found that the most exciting environments, that treated people very well, are also

tough as nails. There is no bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo. ... Excellent organizations provide two things simultaneously: Tough environments and very supportive environments."

Effective association leaders are problem solvers, not problem evaders. If anyone in your organization is aware of any problems, you want to know about it now. You want strong teams that are filled with diverse members who have an overwhelming commitment to the organization but are each capable of challenging other members. Honor, support, and use disagreements when they occur. Encourage everyone to actively disagree without being disagreeable. Well-handled conflict helps build clarity of vision and plan.

But don't limit your communications

with people who make them laugh.

Russ Walden, former president of Ridgecrest Properties, summed it up well: "If you aren't having fun in your work, fix the problem before it becomes serious; ask for help if you need it. If you can't fix it and won't ask for help, please go away before you spoil the fun for the rest of us." That's a perspective worth remembering in this chaotic and changing age in association management.

One executive kept a sign on his desk that read, "Recognize that every 'out front' maneuver you make is going to be lonely. If you feel entirely comfortable, then you're not far enough ahead to do any good. That warm sense of everything going well is usually the body temperature at the center of the herd."

In this age of tension and constant

## If you don't trust your specific staff or volunteers, you won't and shouldn't empower them.



to announcing changes or confronting problems; major in the positive. Give more credit and take more than your share of the blame. Give timely, specific recognition and ask for assistance in the areas you respect and trust the skills of others. Imagine every member and staff person has on his or her chest a sign that reads, "Make me feel important!" Show that they are by being a listening leader and catching your people being effective.

### Take Your Job Seriously *and* Yourself Lightly

Finally, while taking your job of leading your association very seriously, don't forget to take yourself lightly. Humor and laughter make great daily companions on your association's journey to excellence. Humor develops good feelings, rapport, and a positive, lighter atmosphere. People like associating

change, never expect to be comfortable. Your members should demand nothing less. Rest assured, when you manage these leadership tensions, you will not be bored. But with any luck, you won't just be predicting the future, you'll be inventing it and watching others catch up with you. **an**

Review and comment on this article at [www.asaecenter.org/associationsnow](http://www.asaecenter.org/associationsnow).

*Terry Paulson, Ph.D., CSP, CPAE, is a psychologist, columnist, and author. For more information, visit: [www.terrypaulson.com](http://www.terrypaulson.com). He was a featured thought leader at ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership's 2007 Annual Meeting & Exposition, held in Chicago, Illinois.*