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A Legacy of Association Leadership

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I met Dr. Richard McDonald after his death. I have been honored to teach at the Richard McDonald Leadership Institute offered by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

McDonald worked at the Texas Cattle Feeders Association for 32 years. He retired in 2006 after a distinguished career of service to the cattle industry. Among colleagues, industry and professionals he was recognized for his successes.

NCBA administers the Richard McDonald Leadership Institute. During his career he offered guidance for the development of strong state organizations. Based on his leadership the Institute was developed to benefit cattle and beef marketing associations.

His advice was captured through a videotape offering perspectives of success in an association. The video is played at the Cattle Industry Summer Business Meeting each summer. His words ring true for association leadership now as much as they did when the video was produced in 2010.

Through his perspectives association executives and volunteer leaders continue to benefit from his advice.



Association Advice

This is a summary of his advice paraphrased from the video (RM). Below each topic I've added my own perspectives (BH).

What makes a good association executive?

RM: The role of an executive director is not to be friends with the board but to advance the goals of the association the organization.

BH: The mission is the purpose for existence. Nearly every discussion and decision by the board and staff should be framed by the statement. It takes a board-staff partnership to achieve results. At the conclusion of every meeting directors should ask, “Did we advance our mission?”

Balanced roles of board and staff.

RM: Board members are there to govern and establish policy. The officers and committees should allow the staff to do the day to day management. There should not be a need to ask the board for permission to buy a computer when it was already in the budget, for instance.

BH: If the board will establish policy and a budget, the executive director should have authority to act without asking for permission. The board sets the destination and the staff will find the most efficient means to reach it.



Why committees are important.

RM: Committees help the larger board. Avoid the need for a board to make every decision by appointing effective committees. Get at least one “junkyard dog” on the finance committee. Be sure the committees understand their purposes and the board respects the committees.

BH: Committees can benefit the board and staff, or waste their time. Be sure each has a clear purpose. Discourage the board from doing committee work at the board table.

Symptoms of weak governance.

RM: Officers should not make decisions that have not been approved by the board. You don’t want directors to do their own thing without the approval of the board. It’s not about personal desires of any one director. There should be an officer orientation so they understand their roles and the board staff relationship.

BH: Orientation of the board should occur annually. It refreshes directors on their responsibilities, understanding of the financial resources, and awareness of possible risks. The adage rings true, “The board governs and the staff manage.”

Without consensus there will be trouble.

RM: When you don't have consensus and there is good reason, postpone the decision. One can expect a few dissenting votes, but a split of 14 to 16 would cause internal strife. As often as possible strive for consensus for a smooth running association.

BH: Decisions of the board should be considered unanimous. After meetings directors may be asked about meeting outcomes and they should always reply, "I support the decisions of the board." Any opposing statement should be made inside the board meeting, not after the meeting.

Do your homework and prepare the board.

RM: Give the board good information in a brief format. For example a single page of bulleted information is more likely to be read and understood. By giving directors too much information it is subject to interpretation. Avoid reams of paper when bullets will suffice.

BH: Seldom does a volunteer have time to read past page two of a document without interruptions. If directors want more information, make it available, but start with brevity to increase understanding. Even a strategic plan can be reduced to the size of a business card.

The Amarillo Community Foundation administers the Institute. NCBA plans the annual summer training.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and tools at www.nonprofitcenter.com.