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The Qualm Before the Decision: **Peaceful, No-Regrets Decision Making**

By Julie Rogers



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When Patricia V. Blake, FASAE CAE, became the Chief Executive Officer of the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE) about 15 years ago, she immediately took note of how well the society's board performed.

"They are talking to each other and making decisions!" she said. The sharp contrast between ASGE and dysfunctional boards she had seen made her reluctant to risk changes that might alter the board's dynamic.

"It's a very high-functioning board, but that doesn't mean that it's always strategic. The board is very clear for the most part about what is staff's job and what's their job. They don't get into the operational stuff," she said.

Clinical materials can be a different matter, however. Kenneth McQuaid, MD FASGE, then-President of ASGE, realized this while the board looked at an ASGE publication related to product and technology guidelines.

"Dr. McQuaid said, 'We're spending a fair amount of time on these guidelines. I don't know that I believe this board should be editing. I don't know that this makes sense or what we do about it. Can we talk to the board about not doing this kind of work? It seems like committee work,'" Blake said.

To help ASGE deal with this, Blake contacted Mark Engle, DM, FASAE, CAE.

A principal at Chicago-based Association Management Center (AMC), Engle is passionate about improving board performance. He pairs his research on successful boards with his 29 years of experience as an association CEO to help boards make timely, bold and effective decisions.

"I had never done a board evaluation, but I realized it was probably time to do some work with this group," Blake said. "That's why I brought Mark in to help the board with what they should be doing."

Theory to Practice

Engle worked with Blake, McQuaid and then-President-Elect Karen Woods, MD FASGE, to formulate a plan to further improve the board

and keep their focus on strategic work, not tactical.

"We planned to use the BoardSource Assessment (BSA) survey tool and build a board development session based on those results, showing the difference between what they are doing and where they could be," Engle said. "We fielded the BSA tool and got our responses. In the meantime, the president came back and said, 'We have a big, strategic issue to deal with. How do we get the board to make a wise consequential decision?'"

Engle defines a strategic decision as "a mission-critical issue of high magnitude with significant financial implications, relatively uncertainty, and/or significant political ramifications."

ASGE's decision—a financial one related to their building in Downers Grove—is on-mission for ASGE because no one except ASGE's board should be making such an important decision that can affect the association's overall health.

"Decisions about how to spend members' money are very strategic. This is long term and board members obviously feel very responsible," Blake said. "This board is the least risk-averse board I've dealt with. They created the Association for Bariatric Endoscopy division over a phone call. From that perspective, they aren't afraid to take on risk as much as most. But (this decision) is a big thing. When it's a financial decision, when it's strategic, when it's other people's money...they were pretty nervous, and I understand it."

ASGE asked Engle to dedicate the bulk of his time with the board to facilitating a hands-on demonstration of the best practices he researches and preaches, facilitating the making of a wise strategic decision.

The proactive move from theory to practice was necessary, Blake said. "I'm really fussy

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about consultants, especially about communication and strategy. Communications is my background, and I am not very patient with people who are just into theory,” she said. “I know my board pretty well. They are intellectually curious, and they like to have things to see and do in advance. They aren’t very patient with long presentations and are accustomed to thinking in 20-minute segments.”

Expert Inspiration

Good decision-making is Engle’s wheelhouse.

“When you get into the board level, we find that generally, bad decisions are made around the emotional elements of the argument, not the cognitive elements,” Engle said. “Failed decisions are most often the result of taking the emotional path. How do we set up a discussion to get at the cognitive elements of the issue?”

Engle explained, “We’re asked more and more to offer that facilitation. I’ve researched high-performing boards and how they spend time on strategy. We’re researching the tools and techniques that increase the likelihood that strategic discussions will happen in board rooms. We find that part of what helps is good facilitation skills, and so few board chairs are equipped with these in the context of a board on which they serve. It’s difficult for CEOs to lead facilitation because they have powerful input that needs to be part of the conversation.”

Engle’s inspiration for facilitating this board discussion came from leadership guru Warren Bennis.

“A reference so brief it was ridiculous” had piqued Engle’s interest while researching a paper on the impact of transparency in associations.

In a few publications, including the 2004 essay, “Building a Culture of Candor: A Crucial

Key to Leadership” (printed in The Conference Board Annual Report 2004), Bennis describes a qualming session:

“Invite everyone who is party to the decision to some pleasant site away from the office and insist that they try to imagine every possible way the plan could fail and why. Once again, it must be made clear that no idea is unacceptable and that no one will be punished for speaking out.”

Summarizing, Engle said: “Essentially, in a qualming session, you try to figure out every possible way something can fail. This is under the umbrella of a term we call ‘active dissent.’ We know that constructive conflict increases quality decisions. How do you set up constructive conflict? How do you manage it so the affective elements of the issue—the emotions—don’t torpedo the cognitive elements that lead to decision quality?”

Though “pulling out the negative” doesn’t come naturally to Blake, she understood and embraced the concept.

“I’m a glass half full type of person all the time. I don’t deal with worst cases. It’s not a normal place for me,” she said. “But when you’re getting rid of emotional issues, asking those questions makes a lot of sense.”

With Blake’s blessing, Engle created a process based on Bennis’ kernel of an idea.

Facts Counter Fears

The financial decision ASGE’s board needed to make involved risk and long-term implications. Staff did their due diligence ahead of the meeting, asking themselves, “What information do you need to make that decision?” This resulted in three models to present to the board.

For a successful qualming session “you have to be able to defuse fears with real data so you



move to facts, not emotion,” Blake said.

To do that, Engle told Blake to work before the meeting to “anticipate every question you can think of and try to answer it,” so she “went back and did the history.”

“My CFO put together the financial information,” Blake said, “but it didn’t make sense until we put the history behind it. It’s easy to forget that with boards, there is constant change. There are things that I assumed the board knew, but when I stopped and thought about it, I realized 50 percent of

the board wasn’t there when other decisions were made and board members who were there weren’t in the roles they are now. I literally went back and started from the beginning.”

Starting “from the beginning” required researching the seven votes taken to build ASGE’s headquarters.

“I went through the minutes of the board meeting and captured all seven of those decisions, most of which were financial, and put together the history of the financial decisions. ‘This is where we are and here’s where we’re going to go.’ We had not done that before,” she said. “We had to think about who was going to be involved in this conversation.”

Qualming Concerns

At the meeting, Engle first discussed the BSA tool results to set a baseline and identify where there was room for improvement.

“We talked about how high-functioning boards engage in robust discussions to make consequential decisions,” Engle said. “How do they challenge each other and interject? Do they have tools and techniques on how they challenge each other? For higher-performing boards, the answer is yes.”

ASGE’s board members “were curious about their results as a strategic board, and the results

weren’t surprising. They were pretty high functioning,” Blake said. “They were interested in the theory to a degree, but much more interested in using it. ‘Let’s do something!’”

Because ASGE’s board members work well together and the number of directors is conducive to working as a unit, Engle conducted the qualming session with the entire board. (Small groups may be better for other boards, especially boards with many directors or with members who dominate conversations.)

“You have to be able to get everyone’s opinion,” Engle explained. “People will bury their thoughts because they are fearful of being an outlier or an antagonist. This process allows everyone to be an outlier and an antagonist without being torpedoed.”

Engle led the board through the steps he’d developed (see graphic), with an emphasis on encouraging all board members to air their fears and concerns regarding the options before them.

Blake said the board wasn’t initially at ease: “I think people were a little taken aback and didn’t know how to start the conversation, but they clearly wanted to make the right decision.”

With Engle’s encouragement, they jumped in with opinions—and on more than the decision at hand.

“The board helped him rewrite and change the steps according to what made sense,” Blake

said. “Not all of the questions resonated with the board, so they kept at it long enough to get it to make sense. ‘We don’t need this question, but we need this question.’ That may not be exactly how Mark thought it was going to go, though the ultimate decision turned out how he thought it would.”

The board was interested in two of the three options staff had researched and presented.

“No one struggled to put emotional issues aside, because we set it up to deal with cognitive elements first,” Engle said. “When we identified all the ‘fear’ things—and there was maybe a dozen of them—two were affective (emotional). We consciously said as a group that we’d deal with those last. By the time we had discussed the cognitive elements and were down to the two affective issues, the right decision was evident. The board decided not to let those two elements derail a consequential decision.”

Blake said, “We collapsed their concerns into the two or three things that are significant and got rid of the worries about them.”

Thanks to the financial history Blake had researched, she was able to provide financial data to dispel a “what if?” scenario that concerned the board.

“We ended up saying, ‘These are not significant concerns,’ Blake said.

Had there not been an obvious choice at the end of the discussion, Engle could have used a system that would assign numerical values to qualms, based on their severity and likelihood, to provide an analytic path to the best choice. ASGE didn’t require that.

“Doctors are into statistics and data, but they didn’t need a perfect number to get the consensus,” Blake said.

Blake played the role of counselor in the meeting and supplied information from her pre-meeting research, and ASGE’s board didn’t discuss the decision before the qualming session.

“This is a big enough decision that I really wanted the board to make the right decision for them—even if I don’t think it’s the right decision,” she said.

As it happens, the board chose the same option Blake would have recommended, and

she’s nearly certain they would have picked a different option if the qualming session had not been held to bring their concerns to light.

No Regrets


“It was a very big decision for all the doctors to have made,” Blake said. “They were comfortable because of the process. The board had no concerns after the fact. It is not unusual to have board members come back and say they were pushed into something or go out to dinner and think about it more and discuss it and say, ‘I’m not sure.’”

With this decision, “They all walked out of the room saying, ‘That was the right decision.’”

A board member who was unable to attend the meeting—a rarity for ASGE—had been vocal prior about preferring a different option, but he had no issue with the choice once he understood the process and discussion that had occurred.

“Everyone decided it was the right decision,” Blake said. “We’re not used to evaluating emotional vs. fact-based thinking. We think our emotional things are fact until someone makes us question it.”

“A useful tool,” qualming could become part of ASGE’s culture. Blake said she would reserve the process for big strategic decisions because of the amount of background work required for staff to come to the meeting with data to address all potential qualms.

“The board was fairly entertained by the process,” she said. “For the rest of the meeting, board members would say, ‘What would Mark say about this?’ or ‘Mark would steer us away from this!’” 

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