

# Creating the Right Association Culture

Dr. David K. Rehr



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# About



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Dr. David Rehr has over 25 years of experience in executive leadership, advocacy, governance, and federal policy. He is currently Professor at the Antonin Scalia Law School at George Mason University where he teaches Legislative Advocacy and Strategic Leadership, and is CEO of TransparaGov, Inc.

Prior, he served as President and CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). Rehr and his team streamlined NAB program offerings to focus on the future. He spearheaded rebranding efforts to update inaccurate perceptions of the association and industry to reflect the widespread embrace of digital technologies.

Rehr also served as President of the National Beer Wholesalers Association (NBWA), where he catapulted NBWA into the top ten of *Fortune Magazine's* Power Rankings of the 25 most influential lobbying organizations in Washington, DC.

He has appeared on *Washington Life Magazine's* "Power 100" list, and is annually listed as a Top Association Lobbyist in *The Hill*. Rehr has appeared on ABC, NBC, CNBC, Hearst TV, Sinclair Broadcast, and FOX Business, and numerous radio stations.

Rehr is the author of a forthcoming ebook on the successful public affairs campaign on the Digital Television Transition, the largest marketing campaign in American television. *International Performance Magazine* published two of Rehr's leadership articles, "Navigating Change: Leadership in Difficult Times," and "Leadership: The Word Becomes an Action." He holds a M.A. and Ph.D. in economics from George Mason University.

## A Note from the Author

We cannot ignore the culture of an association. Every day our team members come to work to advance the mission of the organization and serve its members.

Every day a multitude of decisions are made by individuals who by their effort advance the organization or keep the status quo. Great internal culture means actions are taken, employees are productive and happy, things get done, and the organization makes tangible progress toward achievement of its mission.



I have been very fortunate to spend over two decades in the association sector. Leading the National Beer Wholesalers Association and the National Association of Broadcasters gave me an up close and personal view of association culture.

Now, as host to CEO Update's award-winning series, Association Newsmakers, I have had the opportunity to speak with and learn from many of the nation's top association leaders.

This eBook is designed to help association leaders improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their organizations by improving the organization's culture. I hope you benefit from these observations and insights.

## Be a Really Good Listener

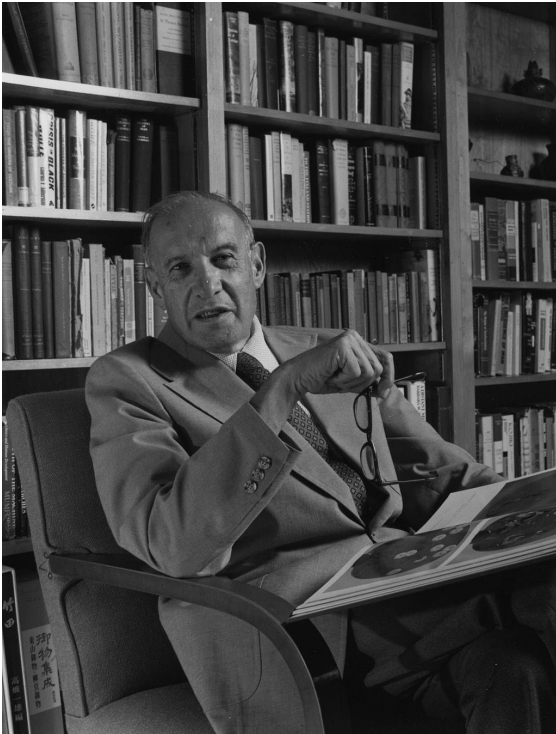
Before we talk about association culture, it is important we understand the importance of listening. The IRS Data Book for 2016 reports there are 63,866 trade and professional associations, and 1,237,094 charitable and philanthropic organizations. Each has a unique mission, with a unique board, and its own culture.

As CEO, one has to start by authentically listening and understanding what is going on in the organization. Before the first day, leaders probably have done the due diligence about the organization and put together some ideas and solutions on improving whatever culture exists. Leaders should keep those thoughts to themselves and find out how others, inside and outside, view the organization's efficiency and effectiveness.

Really understanding the true culture means exceptional listening by the leader.

# What is Association Culture?

Why is it so important to the success of the enterprise?



The late Peter Drucker, management guru, coined the phrase, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” What I believe he meant by that phrase is that you can have great plans for your organization but if you do not have an able team to execute those plans, and without a strong culture, you will end up with little to show for your effort.

M. Jason Martin, University of Central Florida wrote in 2006:

A plethora of definitions exist for organizational culture. Various scholars define culture as how an organization goes about meeting its goals and missions, how an organization solves problems, or as a deeply rooted value that shapes the behavior of the individuals within the group. In reality organizational culture is all of these things. In its entirety organizational culture consists of an organization’s shared values, symbols, behaviors, and assumptions. Simply put, organizational culture is “the way we do things around here.”

Frankly, you can only determine the culture when you first experience an association. The old adage, “what you see is what you get” remains true for a reason.

Do you hear a positive and helpful voice on the phone when you call? Is the receptionist enthusiastic and welcoming when you arrive? Are your interactions with team members memorable (in a good way)? Does the senior leadership, especially the President or CEO, create a bond that makes you want to increase your level of commitment to the organization?

You know the right answers to each of these questions but are they the reality you find?

“  
*Culture eats strategy  
for breakfast.*”

Peter Drucker

## Traits of Outstanding Association Culture

- Mission focus
- Active use of the strategic plan
- Performance metrics enthusiasm
- Position goal(s) alignment
- Positive climate for team members
- Commitment to lifelong learning for staff
- Respect for diversity and inclusion

# Steps to Improve Organizational Culture (that work)

Improving association culture can be challenging but it must be done so the organization can succeed.

No longer do associations have the ability to move slowly when adapting to change.

Today, with disruption all around us, associations are one of the few places different entities can advance the advocacy, economic, or public relations/reputation interests of an industry, profession, or sector.

## **Recognize that creating the right culture is not easy.**

It is hard for many people to change. Longtime employees feel comfortable with the status quo, and it is likely that some of the board of directors do too.

You need to be deeply committed to culture improvement with key stakeholders supporting the effort. There needs to be constant communication to all; it must continually reinforce the reason(s) why it is necessary, and highlight positive benefits for the team.

Expect bumps along the way. But your enthusiasm and positive outlook as a leader can go a long way to make the change permanent.

## **Some people will not want to get on board the new organization.**

Unfortunately, there will be individuals who don't see the benefits of the new culture. They will see it as a challenge to their power, their personal prestige, or simply to the status quo.

You need to be clear to them that their choice is to enthusiastically embrace the change or leave the organization.

The smart ones will embrace the change. You cannot let a few negative voices reduce the team's overall enthusiasm.

## **Increase communications throughout the process.**

You cannot over communicate. The team wants to be part of the process and they need to be kept informed.



**The Head of Human Resources (HR) as Gatekeeper**

Your top HR person is the face of the organization to all potential team members. Be sure that person reflects the mission, vision, and values of the association.

Unfortunately, many leaders see their HR team as added costs; I probably did too when I first led an organization.

But the importance of having the right person in HR (for small and large organizations) was made abundantly clear when I once had the wrong person in that position. The person did not share the values of the organization, and subsequently, recommended the wrong people for various positions.

The person recommended people like themselves – no commitment to excellence, no service orientation, and an unpleasant attitude when interacting in a professional setting.

The senior team recommended we make a change and suddenly the new employees hired by the new head of HR 'got it' and the culture dramatically improved.

# What a Leader Can Do Right Now

## **Find out the truth about your association culture.**

As a leader, it is sometimes hard to find out the truth about an association's culture.

If you are an incoming CEO, meet with individuals you respect before stepping into the organization and find out their views, how he/she sees the organization externally and what interactions they have had with association personnel. Take notes and ask general questions about attitudes, service, follow-up, and advancement of mission.

I would recommend talking to 5-7 people who will be honest in their observations.

## **Reflect the members or industry you represent.**

A picture does tell a thousand words. Many association staff do not come from the business or industry the association represents.

*To build culture, talk  
with your staff, not to  
your staff.*

To ensure our employees understood who they were working for each and every day, I asked NBWA members from across the country to send beer paraphernalia to be framed and placed throughout the office. We also indicated which member provided the items. The members loved the importance we placed on them. Our staff could notice the brands, marketing, and promotional materials wholesalers use every day.

It helped the staff better understand and appreciate the industry.

## **Meet with the entire staff individually.**

The time of the CEO is limited. It cannot be squandered with unnecessary meetings. However, taking time to talk with all employees pays off when you are working to improve culture.

I started this practice informally at the NBWA with around 20 employees. It was easy with a manageable group. It was a much bigger time commitment at the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB with upwards of a hundred and fifty employees). Each employee had up to ten minutes to talk about how he/she came to the job, how he/she viewed the organization, how we could make the NAB better, and how he/she interacted with other team members.

We eventually used a number of ideas from those conversations to enhance our culture, and make the NAB both more efficient and effective. It also built a stronger team, meaning the return on CEO investment of time was worthwhile.

# Traits of an Exceptional Culture

So what are the keys to having an outstanding culture in your association? Those mentioned here have guided CEOs I have interviewed on CEO Update's Association Newsmakers, and I have used during my leadership at prominent associations. All focus on getting the best results with the minimum amount of conflict and cost. Having a great culture involves all the key stakeholders with a focus on delivering 'value' every hour of every day.

## Mission Focus

Nothing is more important to an association than its mission. It is the single idea that keeps everyone engaged and focused. The board, CEO, staff, and members all need to own it. It gives the organization something to use to measure all of its programs and services against. Without a clear mission, it becomes unclear what resources and people should be engaged. Personalities with their own opinions or agendas begin to split the organization's concentration and ability to succeed.

*Staying focused on a clear, concise mission makes it easier to have an outstanding culture. Everyone knows what is expected.*

## Active Use of the Strategic Plan

This is the "treasure map" for the organization. It outlines the association's actions for the next three or more years. Almost every organization has what is commonly called a strategic plan. The plan should precisely outline the current revenue, future revenue (including underlying assumptions), potential non-traditional revenue, programs and services, staffing requirements, and anything else that would impact revenue or expenses.

At both the NBWA and NAB, we also determined that each year would end with a surplus that would need to be translated into the annual budget. At the NBWA, we started the process by surveying stakeholders as part of the strategic planning process to ensure all perspectives were represented and we had sufficient data to help the board's move in the direction to provide maximum value. It ensured that all stakeholders were engaged in charting the future of the organization.

As important as just having the plan, we actually used it. Association staffs are generally familiar with the strategic planning process. Committees are formed, a consultant is hired, hours are spent talking about future needs, a plan is produced, the board votes on adoption, and then it gets conveniently forgotten until three years or so later when the strategic process begins again. It is taken out of the file cabinet so it can be updated.

Successful associations never forget the plan and work daily towards its implementation. Like the mission statement, it keeps the board of directors and the team focused on what should be done and when.



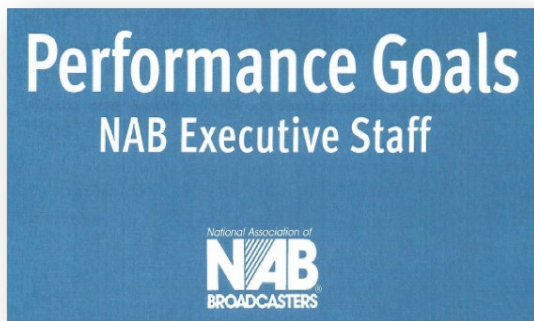


As the former CEO of the Miller Brewing Company, a native South African, said to me when we were talking about running an organization, “You can either run on the front of your foot, or the back of your foot.” Organizations that run on the back of their feet never win the competition. I hope that you, like me, want to be on your front foot.

## Performance Metrics Enthusiasm

Today, virtually all organizations are using performance metrics as an objective way to determine success or failure. Of course, not everything can be reduced to numbers; but we can come close to measuring everything.

Data analytics and key performance indicators (KPIs) have come late to the association community. Successful association boards, members, and CEOs want to be able to measure investments to ensure results.



*Each year, the CEO and all senior leaders should provide their annual goals to the board of directors and present them to the entire staff. The staff presentation brings additional accountability and ensures we were all working in the same direction.*

Today, even boards of directors want performance metrics on their own performance, according to research of over 500 board members in research I conducted on the changing role of boards.

Most associations should look for a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures to demonstrate results. Metrics takes away personalities, politics, and organizational intrigue.

## Position Goal(s) Alignment

Complete job descriptions, annual goals and personnel reviews have never been more important. Team members want to know what is expected of them, how they will be measured, and what they have accomplished over the past year. It also allows you to remove those individuals who either do not perform or do not want to be part of the disciplined team advancing the mission through the strategic plan. The annual setting of employees expectations is critical for association success. It removes the subjective critique of a person's personality and moves the focus on objective contribution.

## Positive Climate for Team Members

Team members have more professional opportunities than ever before. That means associations must have a positive climate to recruit and retain employees. Beyond just salary and benefits, people are increasingly looking for positions that advance their values, and positively impact society. For example, it may mean having flexibility for employees with young children. Above all, successful associations must build proactive ways to create a positive environment that nurtures diversity, inclusion, and ensures there is worth for all employees, no matter what the title or responsibilities.

## Commitment to Lifelong Learning for Staff

Job opportunities for exceptional employees has never been greater. Yes, they work for the salary and benefits you provide. But there needs to be more.

Today, beyond wanting to be a “part” of something making a difference,” your team members will not want to become bored or believe they are not being challenged.



One way to keep your team highly motivated is to have a commitment to lifelong learning. Work to maximize employee opportunities, even if you are constrained by budget or time. However, with some imagination, you can create a compelling program that demonstrates that you want to help your team members be better – perhaps build on the level of skills, increase their professionalism, or learn more about their city or industry in which they work.

The key is to have good presenters and engaging topics. We had authors speak about their books, experts on association topics from other associations and vendors who appeared at our conventions and meetings. At both the NBWA and NAB, I was able to leverage our education benefit, helping entry level staff start or finish degrees. I even helped one employee graduate from an evening law school program; it was a benefit offered and a right of the employee to use it.

But often team members are not fully aware of the education benefit or are worried about using it. As leader, you can lead by example by being a lifelong learner yourself. Embracing new ideas, exploring the history of your association or the industry it represents, will only make you more effective in what you do.

## Respect for Diversity and Inclusion

Your team members want to be included.

Your organization must be diverse in its perspective to represent all those who belong. Embrace it. Diversity and inclusion really represents respect and openness.

Recent research reveals that 83% of associations view diversity and inclusion as part of their core values. 84% focus on diversity and inclusion because it is “the right thing to do.” Embracing and engaging with the entire team makes an organization stronger, increases the respect and bond you have with your team, and keeps you more informed on the needs of your members and those who benefit from your organization.

# Examples of Reinforcing Culture Changes

As you work to get the organizational culture right, there are a number of ways you can publicly reinforce the new culture.

Here are some designed to generate ideas to help your organization.

## Reinforce the Messaging on Elevators and Other Public Places

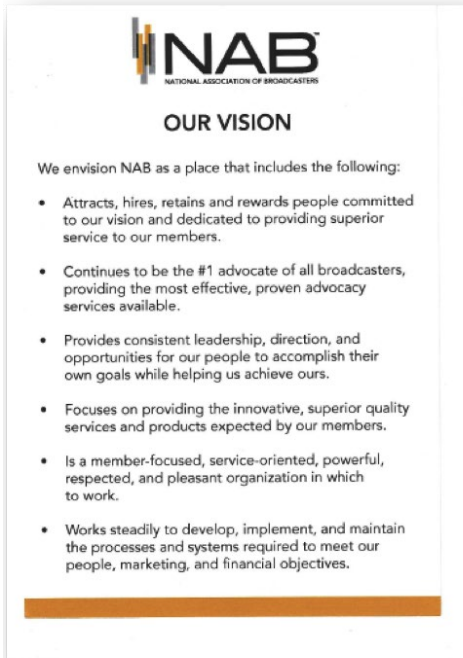
We wanted to reinforce the brand of the Scalia Law School at George Mason University and remind students, faculty, and staff of our exceptional attributes. It was part of our effort to raise awareness of the reputation of the school. U.S. News currently ranks the school #41 (up from #45).

Everyone is focused to think about the message and it has been well received. Most everyone uses an elevator!

## Creating and Distributing a Vision

One way to reinforce an exceptional culture is to create and circulate a vision to all stakeholders – Board members, staff, members, and vendors.

It confirms to them how the organization views the future and how it will interact. It gives team members a look at what they are getting into with their involvement and polices organization practices and interactions.



## Be Explicit About Your Values

In meetings, interviews and elevator conversations, I learned that some team members felt like the NAB didn't care if they stayed or left, or didn't feel like they mattered.

Working with a task force of the board of directors, we created, posted and provided every employee a commitment to the kind of values we wanted and rewarded those values in annual reviews. It was enthusiastically received and, not surprisingly, raised the enthusiasm and productivity in the workplace.

All employees, and especially those with managerial responsibilities, were qualitatively evaluated on their commitment to these values. It created a stronger sense of team and respect for everyone's contribution.

## One Fun Idea to Reinforce Culture Change

We wanted to breakdown silos at the NAB and create a stronger team where all the employees knew each other by their first name. It was a "secret Santa" knockoff.

We gave several employees Starbucks cards and announced the rules: If you addressed someone holding the gift card by their first name, you would immediately get a \$20 gift card! It was fun and quickly everyone knew each other better.

## Call Your Team Members on their Birthday

At night, I would call the office number of an employee whose birthday was the next day, wishing them a happy birthday.

I was always surprised by how the person felt hearing from the CEO and how it built a positive culture. Try it. It will work for you.



# Takeaways

## 10 Takeaways for Creating the Right Association Culture

1. Assess the current culture to see what needs improvement.
2. Work for honest feedback, insight, and suggestions.
3. Have the right HR leader who shares the values you and the board desire.
4. Be sure you have board buy-in and support.
5. Decide what tools you will employ to improve the culture.
6. Execute the plan (with constant communications) on how the organization benefits, and how individual team members benefit.
7. Make a personal commitment as the leader to convey the culture you desire.
8. Make it fun. Be creative and innovate. Demonstrate results.
9. Make the organization's vision and values a part of the annual review process.
10. Keep expectations high for continued exceptional behavior and performance.



“

*When the culture is strong, you can trust everyone to do the right thing.”*

Brian Chesky, Co-founder and CEO, Airbnb