



SOC e-News

ABA Section Officers Conference

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WHAT I WISH . . .

PERSPECTIVES FROM A PAST CHAIR

Peter Bennett

Immediate Past Chair, Tort Trial and Insurance Practice



I have just finished my year as Chair of the Tort Trial and Insurance Practice Section (TIPS). As I look back I marvel at how quickly the year has passed. I am also very grateful for how well it went.

Each of you who reads this column is preparing to chair your entity. Your leadership has given you a great honor and along with that honor comes a great opportunity to do something. In my experience, there are two styles of chairs, those who merely hold the reigns of leadership and those who really do something with the opportunity. You have the power to be either. The choice is really up to you but it is an obvious one as far as I am concerned.

It is important that you take some time to reflect as early as possible on what you want to accomplish. Eventually it will come to you. In TIPS, we have a Long Range Planning Committee that the Vice-Chair chairs. Although my long range planning committee worked hard and developed an agenda, my vision for my chairmanship came to me during a long car ride to the airport after leaving another ABA meeting and after the work of my committee had been completed. While it may not have made a difference, I do wish that I had started thinking more deeply at an earlier time. My message to you is to take some down time and use it to think about your group and the issues that you face.

Be bold. As an eventual chair, you have the ability to make big things happen. One of my first projects was a CLE program that brought together a group of nationally prominent speakers from extremely diverse points of view on a topic of mutual interest who had never shared a stage together. Other than two verifiable schedule

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conflicts, every invitee responded positively to the invitation. They responded enthusiastically because they appreciated the concept and that the invitation came from the chair of an ABA Section (my personal identity mattered very little). Over a year later, our program which drew over 300 attendees is still a topic of discussion and it has had lasting effects which will continue well into the future.

But whatever you do, realize that in order to be successful, it is likely going to need support from other leaders and in particular your chair-elect. Make sure that you have the support of your leadership before you start. And if you do not have that support, then convince them to get on board. While it may be your vision, it is not about you.

During your year, you are going to have the opportunity to address various audiences. Typically, these opportunities take the form of welcome remarks. After making the typical welcome remarks (a membership pitch) a couple of times, it dawned on me that every time I had an audience I had an opportunity to advance the agenda I had created for TIPS. For the rest of the year, I used every opportunity to speak as an opportunity to deliver substantive remarks about some aspect of my agenda. Although not every aspect of this agenda fit every audience, there was something there for every group. And once your audience realizes that you actually have something to say, they will pay attention.

The real work of your group however is done by a large group of volunteers and your staff.

In order to get your volunteers to work hard on the mission of your group, you need to motivate them to do so. We worked very hard on planning our leadership meetings. No detail was too small. We tried to make them as fun as possible. We tried to make them a reflection of where we wanted to see the Section evolve in the future. The theme was if we work hard, then we get to play hard. We rolled the theme out early and often and when our leadership showed up to the Fall Meeting, they were rewarded. I believe that this work made a huge difference in the willingness of our volunteers to get our work done.

Last but not least, your staff is perhaps the most important group to your year. Get to know them as soon as you can. Get to know them well. Become friends. As early as possible, take a trip to Chicago (or D.C.) and spend a day with them as they do their jobs. Ask them for their input. They know more than you do. And they will be running your Section long after you are done. But the best part is that if they are not already your friends, then you will acquire friends for life.