

Time After Time, *A Good Board Knows There's More Than One Right Answer*

by Donna Cameron, CAE, MCH President

Not long ago, I was sitting in a hotel room in Denver applying icepacks to an arm injury. I hadn't planned very well. The only thing within reach to read was a single page of *The Rocky Mountain News*—the comic page. After reading the comics, 15 minutes remained on ice, and I was without anything to read. All that was left was the puzzle in the corner of the comic page. It was one of those "Wuzzles"—word riddles that create or disguise a phrase, name, or common saying.

Some Wuzzles take a lot of thinking to solve. This one was an easy one, so after one glance, I was still left with nearly 15 minutes before I could move (sitting still is not something I do well). Had I not been in an awkward position with two ice packs wrapped around my arm, I would have stopped thinking about the puzzle and moved on to something else, or at least found the rest of the newspaper.

However, I looked at the Wuzzle again and saw a different answer—one that could be considered equally correct. That got me to thinking, "If there are two right answers, why not three?" and a moment later a third occurred to me—and I liked that one best of all.

"Okay, if there are three, why not four?" I did a little more thinking and another one emerged. One problem – four equally workable solutions...what a great life lesson! There are probably more than four solutions to the puzzle, but, by then, I was intrigued by a new idea. It occurred to me that when associations are at their best, this is what they do. Rather than stop cold when they come up with a solution to a problem, they keep looking at it. They refine the solution by saying, "Yes, and..." (not "Yes, but...") and they stay open to alternate solutions. And the group or individual who came up with the first answer doesn't feel a need to defend or protect that first solution. It's teamwork and group dynamics at their very best.

One of the most common complaints about associations is how long they take to make decisions. It's a fair complaint. In an environment that's moving faster than ever before—faster than we imagined possible only a short while ago—organizations need to be able to respond quickly and take advantage of opportunities that may not be open to us next week or next month—or worse, may be snatched up by a faster, more nimble organization, one that may be competing for our members' dues dollars or their loyalty. That's why many associations are deliberately looking at their governance structure and seeing where and how they can streamline their processes to become more nimble.

To achieve this, we're seeing organizations reduce the size of their boards, eliminate cumbersome, broad-focus standing committees in favor of issue- and

action-oriented taskforces. This is all very well and good – and entirely necessary – but in our eagerness to streamline, we mustn't give short-shrift to the actual decision-making process.

There's a difference between streamlining your processes, or your structure, to get to the decision-making stage sooner, and actually streamlining the decision-making process. The first is desirable, the second may be problematic.

The important thing is not to make decisions, but to make *good* decisions. We must remind ourselves that identifying a solution or a possible means to an end is not a signal to stop looking. What if, like this Wuzzle, the solution is just one of several possible solutions, and by stopping too soon, we miss another—more elegant, more effective—outcome?

My experience is that good boards don't stop exploring when they come up with one answer to a complex problem. They acknowledge the possible solutions and keep probing. That's when boards are at their best—when they know they're onto something and they keep looking and questioning until they recognize in their collective body the solution that resonates with who they are and what they want to become.