

# A Team Built on Trust

**E**ver wonder how well other chief elected officers and their chief staff executives get along with each other and make things happen? With this interview we offer you a glimpse of one such successful relationship.

As you would deduce, it isn't magic that makes it work. It's commitment to open lines of communication—focusing on what you want to accomplish and arriving at the best solution through a workable process.

It's also recognizing, as Mark Estes—elected president of the American Association of Law Libraries, Chicago, Illinois—puts it, “that both of you are essential to the success of the organization.” His counterpart, Judith Genesen, executive director of AALL, also acknowledges this mutual respect with her wonderfully succinct answer to this question: “How do you make decisions together?” “With care,” she advises.

Estes and Genesen reveal much about the process and dynamics of the chief elected officer–chief staff executive bond. Just as importantly, they reveal how much can be accomplished when you have a good thing going.

## ***How do you work together to help your board work effectively as a team?***

**Estes:** Actually, Judy starts when the board *nominations* are made, building a relationship with each of the candidates. The association arrived at this practice as a result of listening to an officer a few years ago who focused on the feeling of being a stranger coming into a fixed group.

Moreover, Judy is careful not to get allied with any particular group or camp. She's careful not to be seen as favoring one candidate over another.

**Genesen:** We communicate with each nominee (two candidates for each open position) immediately on a personal basis and by letter. From that point on, every nominee to the board is copied on every general board mailing—agenda books, all correspondence that affects the whole executive board. We've institutionalized this process enough that as soon as a person is nominated, we ask her or him to hold open the dates of the board meetings.

Last year for the first time we brought the newly elected treasurer and president-elect to the budget meeting before [their installation at] the annual meeting. Along

***An association's chief elected officer and its chief executive discuss what makes their leadership partnership work.***

with the current treasurer and current president, they had a full voice in order not to be ignorant of the decisions that were made for the money they're really going to have to manage.

**Estes:** Actually, we try to achieve as much overlap of outgoing and incoming board members as we can. It helps people get up to speed faster. They understand what's going on; they can ask more informed questions and make more informed contributions.

**Genesen:** Our presidents-elect have a lot to do with the texture of the association during their prepresidential year as well as when they're president. Mark and I did the ASAE Symposium for Chief Elected Officers and Chief Staff Executives in October after Mark took office in July and before Mark's official duty of sifting through all the committee volunteer forms.

Mark's first major obligation was delineating his presidential priorities for the year, and Mark was careful to structure what he wanted within the framework of the association's strategic plan and its operating plan.

### **How do the two of you make decisions together?**

**Genesen:** When we're faced with something that just pops up new, we follow a general pattern.

**Estes:** Most recently we had to deal with an issue surrounding our policy of not listing in our newsletter job announcements if the employer discriminates. We learned that one of our listers was appearing to discriminate based on religion. So Judy and I analyzed how we could respond to that—what our alternatives were and what we needed to do right then.

We looked for guidance from historic documents and policies, and we gathered facts from the employer. We determined that I needed to decide if we would not carry listings of this employer until our placement committee and executive board could review the case. This is one where I had to decide, and Judy helped me make a decision that I felt comfortable with . . . and that she felt comfortable with.



**Estes:**  
*If you see a hazard in the road and then focus on it, you'll more than likely run into that hazard.*  
**But if you look past the hazard to where you want to go, you go right by it smoothly.**

**Genesen:** We both had a stake in it, in that I'm nominally the publisher of our periodicals, and therefore it is my responsibility to say what goes into the newsletter and what doesn't. But I saw it as a member-to-member issue. I had a guideline to follow, and the member had a point of view that skirted around the guideline.

And Mark's view was, let's find out what some of our sister organizations have done about this, because this was a concern that they would be facing with this institution as well.

### **How often are you in contact with one another?**

**Estes:** Every other day at minimum, and if we're dealing with something tough it may be several times in one day as new information turns up.

**Genesen:** We both have a tendency to be talkers and brainstormers, so we try to be very careful to say, "I need to go through this list quickly." Or, "I have a problem. Do you have time to brainstorm with me?" That is, we try to set up the parameters when we begin a conversation.

### **What do you do when you have a difference of opinion?**

**Genesen:** Let me give you an example. When I received the announcement of ASAE's annual meeting, I told Mark that my initial reaction [for a variety of reasons] was that I thought it would be better if I didn't go. Mark disagreed—he was 180 degrees away from me in that he thinks that it's essential for us to bring back ideas.

Even more interesting, Mark thinks—as does the entire board, I believe—that part of my role is to represent the profession of librarianship publicly in settings that I'm included in be-

cause of association management, where members may not be. That is, that I have a public face to put on for the association in places where members don't go. And that point persuaded me.

### **How would you describe some of the dynamics of working out differences of opinion?**

**Estes:** Focusing on first and foremost what it is you want to get to, what you want to accomplish—not on what went wrong.

I use analogies from physical activities like bicycling or motorcycling. If you see a hazard in the road and then focus on it, you'll more than likely run into that hazard. But if you look past the hazard to where you want to go, and you see the hazard only in your peripheral vision, you go right by it smoothly.



## How do you help your board navigate the hazards?

**Estes:** I literally use that analogy and tell them that we need to focus on what it is we wish to accomplish, not on what went wrong.

But it's a delicate balance of listening, letting them vent a little bit of frustration about some mistakes that happened, but only a little bit. I don't want to let them get bogged down in it. I tell them, "Yes, we are all upset that this happened. Let's characterize it not as 'it should not happen' but instead as 'this positive thing that should occur.'" I direct them to redescribe it with a positive descriptor.

## How do the two of you prepare for a board meeting?

**Estes:** Judy has of course the overall institutional memory of things that we have to accomplish in the board agenda. And I rely upon her to create the overall framework... although I come from a background of procedural and process concern, too. So I'm sensitive to the process nature. Judy has a sense of how long things will take.

For the November board meeting—my first "real" board meeting—Judy sent me the first draft of the agenda, noting how long we expected discussion of particular topics to take. I suggested we move some items around so that no one person would be talking for a long time.

Another level of strategizing—considering the "what if this member says this and that member says that"—occurs not so much for a board meeting but for an association membership meeting. As an example, the two of us involved the board with the discussion of how we would handle debate about a proposed dues increase.

## Talk of a dues increase can spark discontent among the membership. How did you avoid that hazard?

**Genesen:** Ours may be a pretty unique dues increase. I haven't found anybody who has done it this way. Up until this

proposal passed, all dues decisions had been made by the members at a business meeting at the annual meeting.

Our financial advisory committee wanted us never to have to do what we had done a few years ago—namely, raise our dues in one year by 75 percent. That passed and has established the association on a much more solid financial footing. But it was only the first chapter.

The advisory committee wanted the format to regularize dues increases as needed to cover basic administrative activities.

The proposition they put to the board, which the board adopted, was that the budget committee would have the right to index the dues to the prior year's total gross domestic product indicator, should a dues increase be necessary for the budget. ►

## PROFILE

American Association of Law Libraries  
Chicago, Illinois

**Membership:** 4,500 professional librarians who work in academic and law libraries; law firm and corporate libraries; and court and government libraries, including the Supreme Court and law library of the Library of Congress; and 500 associate members who are interested in the profession.

**Staff size:** 10 full-time equivalent.

**Budget size:** \$2.7 million.

**Board size:** 11 elected and 2 representatives—one from the Council of Chapter Presidents and one from the Special Interest Section Council.

**Length of term:** Three years. The president serves in a different capacity each year: once as president-elect, once as president, and once as past president. The secretary and treasurer are elected in alternate years, and two new board members are elected every year, so that the vacating and filling of positions is staggered.

**Executive committee:** Consists of the president, president-elect, and one board member.

**Number of board meetings:** Four: two at the annual meeting (which usually is in July)—one with the outgoing board at the beginning and one with the incoming board after the work of the meeting has been concluded—and two board meetings at headquarters (one in November and one in April).

**Executive director:** Judith Genesen

**President:** Mark Estes, the librarian, Holme Roberts & Owen, Denver, Colorado

The budget committee would then submit the request for an increase to the board. The increase would have been publicized ahead of time, and the members would be aware of it at the meeting but would not have a vote on it. Whether or not to raise membership dues would be the board's decision.

The campaign to get this proposition adopted was very carefully crafted by Mark's predecessor and the board. All the concerns that people raised about the increase were answered in print, and board members were talking about it on their chapter visits and answering questions all year long. And we got to the business meeting with strategies to handle it. The vote went fast and as smooth as silk.

So the board now, for the first time in its 85-year history, has the power to adjust dues at a very modest level without going back to the members for a membership vote.

### **What did you do to help your board members help this process along?**

**Genesen:** One informational tool that worked very well was a paper prepared by a member of the financial advisory committee.

The paper was a lucid description of the process and a discussion of what would have happened to dues over a period of time had this been in place and how we could have avoided some of that 75 percent dues increase I mentioned earlier. The paper presented a whole list of rational approaches to why the proposed system of raising dues was necessary.

**Estes:** There was first a realization on every board member's part that this was a good idea because the debate on raising dues otherwise was so, I think, unproductive; it just didn't move us forward.

We all recognized that if we had the ability to make minor dues adjustments, we could keep the association focused on the larger, more important issues rather than on just keeping up.

So we had an initial buy-in from all the board members. They were committed completely. After the buy-in, it was mostly an education process. The paper Judy mentioned was in part a script; it mentioned discussion points and how to respond to a variety of questions.

### **How did you keep the board focused and cohesive?**

**Genesen:** We had Bud Crouch [a Langhorne, Pennsylvania-based senior partner in Glenn H. Tecker Consultants] come in to do board training with both the outgoing and incoming boards so that the outgoing people didn't feel as abrupt a separation from the board and the newcomers had a sense of belonging

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more spaces,  
more choices  
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less hassles  
— in Tulsa.*



*What city did  
the 1990  
census prove  
to be "most  
American?"  
Give up?  
It's Tulsa!*

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for rodeos,  
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— even big-time  
roundball.*



...ht away. Crouch gave us some very important verbal cues to use, and Mark and I both have been using them all year when we talk to each other and to board members.

**What are these communication cues?**

**Genesen:** One is that you have to repeat something 18 times before anyone will understand it.

And the other is the notion of the dead moose in the middle of the conference table. It's a corpse, disintegrating before your eyes in a very disgusting way. Everyone's aware of it lying in the middle of the table, but out of sheer politeness no one will mention the fact that it's there.

The point is that when we're tiptoeing around something, the image of a dead moose comes up easily for us, and we think, "Uh oh, that's why we're not

getting down to basics with this; there's a dead moose here." And then we stop what we're doing and figure out what the dead moose is before we proceed.

I've been dealing with groups for a long time now, and it's the best tool I've ever found because it diffuses discomfort. It's humorous—a way to get at something without causing anybody to lose face.

**Estes:** A related part of this is that at the end of Crouch's training, he administered the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, a personality preference instrument, and I think we used references to ourselves by our own preferences as an effective means of getting people to understand immediately where we were coming from with our particular statement—and our need for closure or continued discussion with a particular issue.

Understanding where people are coming from has made us better listeners.

**What is one of the best outcomes of the good communication the two of you have?**

**Genesen:** Mark is never personally threatened by a negative comment. It's something I've learned from him. In fact, Mark took this view to its ultimate expression when he introduced an open forum into the programming of our annual business meeting of the members.

**Estes:** Now our members have a forum to raise any questions they have. No debate, no discussion, they just raise the concern. I've been responding to those concerns through my newsletter column.

**Genesen:** This openness, or absence of defensiveness, is a piece of what's happened to the texture of the management of this association internally, and now because it's so central to the way Mark operates, it's been turned externally to

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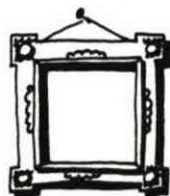
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\* American Demographics, January 1992.



the members as well. He certainly has changed the way I behave.

**Estes:** An extension of that texture shaping is that I got the board members to agree to make some additional phone calls throughout the year—to call one member a month that they didn't know and ask how the association's doing. We're calling it our "random member call around." And the initial reaction from members is very positive.

**Genesen:** The rapid growth of the association in the last 10 years has changed the texture of what the old timers remember as the intimacy of the crowd. Mark has succeeded in bringing his reaching-out, inclusive personality to bear in a structured way for the benefit of the association.

Likewise, without micromanaging in any way, Mark has brought a lot of philosophy into the way we think about things at headquarters.

He conveys the sense of wanting the staff to feel like a major ingredient within the association. Therefore one of my goals and objectives this year was to get the staff to create a mission statement for themselves to give them a sense of how they belong to the association and what the association needs them for. Initially I wasn't very comfortable about taking the time to do it, but it's having a positive effect.

**Estes:** I also came to headquarters to share with the staff my vision of how vital they are to the success of my presidency and the association.

**Genesen:** That was a very important thing to do. The staff's general complaint in prior years had always been that the board comes and goes without paying any attention to them.

My view is that the staff is here to create a level playing field for the members to have their plans come to fruition in the way they want. We staff do have longer institutional memories, but that doesn't make us more correct. We can advise, we can persuade, we can do all kinds of things, but ultimately we have to take the members' direction or it doesn't work.



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**Estes:** But I look at this as part of a long process. The association is where we are because of what many other people have done. My presidency is just the continuation of a process that I will have played a part in. I will be quite happy when my term is through that we have made some changes—not necessarily that this will be seen as "Mark Estes's year." And the staff is essential and vital to accomplishing that. I can't force them; I have to persuade, and I can only be persuasive if the staff has already been primed to go in the same direction.

**What would you advise another chief staff–chief volunteer team that they should always do?**

**Estes:** You have to go to the ASAE Symposium for Chief Elected Officers and Chief Staff Executives or a similar

kind of training experience. After that, communicate honestly. Recognize that both of you are essential to the success of the organization—it's teamwork.

Focus on what you want to accomplish and not on what went wrong. For example, Judy said she was aiming for 99 percent accuracy in the member data base. And I said, we just want it to be right.

**Genesen:** I would add just one thing. We acknowledge our disagreements right up front. We're very open about issues in which we both have a stake and we're starting from varying points of view.

**Estes:** And we say why it's important.

**Genesen:** And the one to whom it's most important usually is the one who wins. There is no such thing as 50–50 in these. Somehow or another you have to be sensitive enough to acknowledge your own

feelings and to hear the other's and to make a determination about the one to whom it is most important.

**And what would you advise a chief staff–chief volunteer team never to do?**

**Genesen:** I have one "never do"—it's the only one I have: Never operate behind the other's back. It makes the burden of this kind of work almost heavier to bear than is possible if you feel you're being undermined or blindsided. The essential is trust. Without trust you're never able to satisfy; with trust, it's all possible. ■

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