



American Water Works Association Pacific Northwest Section

**Spring 2024 Board Strategic Planning Meeting August 1-2, 2024
Suncadia Resort Board Room
Minutes**

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 a.m. by Chair Nick Belmont. Also present were Chair Elect Joel Cary, Trustees Jolene Gibson, Chandra Hingston, Jeremiah Hunt, Erika Murphy, Joanie Stultz, Brian Wilson, AWWA Director James Dean, Treasurer Jamie Porter and Executive Director Kyle Kihs. Past Chair Dan Sleeth was excused.

Executive Director Kyle Kihs introduced Facilitator James Robilotta

Curiosity Creates Community

After a warm-up exercise, Mr. Robilotta contrasted curiosity with apathy and opened the discussion about how to stop apathy and start learning about each other, keeping in mind that curiosity creates community.

- Longevity doesn't equal loyalty; loyalty results from believing that what you do matters.
- People want to feel seen, heard, respected and safe.
- Hearing your story will increase buy-in.
- Learn what makes people tick.
- Skill set vs. mindset.
- Great questions are more memorable than great quotes.
- You can be interesting or interested.

After a conversational exercise, the following take-aways were identified.

- A skill set of curiosity is asking the right questions. "Tell me more about that."
- Assuming is easier than learning.
- Our brains love a pattern – are the patterns you are in with your people serving you?
- Patterns need to be interrupted.
- Think about whether the Board has established patterns.
- Commitment is patience plus persistence.
- Do you commit or do you comment?
- Curiosity takes vulnerability.
- What is the balance of listening and talking.
- Leaders set the vision.
- Listen to stories, recognize each other as human beings; how are you/who are you.
- Community in the workplace is as important as money and other material rewards.
- Curiosity is a choice.

Analyzing Communication Patterns

How to more effectively communicate, analyze potential clarity of expectation issues and design ways to disrupt the patterns that are not serving PNWS

The Supervision Spectrum from Boss to Friend

BOSS

Loose Connections

Team performance more important than team dynamics

Care only about credibility

Err on the side of micromanaging

Seen as unapproachable & feared

FRIEND

Personal relationships (maybe too personal)

Team dynamics over team performance

Care only about relatability

Err on the side of leniency

Get walked on and often not respected (can be manipulated)

GREAT LEADER

Professional relationships

Team performance equal to team dynamics

Relatability backed by credibility

Set vision then give courageous feedback and praise

Respected as a leader and seen as an advocate

The Board reflected on this concept with questions:

- Where do you fall on the spectrum?
- Where would you say others fall?
- What do you need to do to move toward the middle?
- Your intent does not always equal your impact.
- If you get no feedback either you are mailing it in or you have not created a safe space for it.

A volunteer board poses special challenges

- Only three face to face meetings per year with an agenda that has to be gotten through quickly since it will be months before the next meeting resulting in a feeling that things are rushed.
- Considerable communication through the Executive Director who is the connection point for all. E-mails arrive and members can respond but it is fractured (some respond, some don't).
- Board members are collaborative and project-based in their work, how do we bring this to the Board?
- How do you balance the time commitment.
- Executive Committee (EC) meetings take place once a month but also feel rushed.
- The Board situation is different from having day-to-day interactions with co-workers.
- Dealing with employees is different than dealing with volunteers who are spread far apart with occasional interactions.

Board Strengths and Reasons to Celebrate

- Board puts on an excellent conference with outstanding reviews.
- Executive Director has stayed on.
- Board is diverse.
- Considered an honor to be asked by the nominations committee to run for office.
- Board members believe in the mission and want to engage.
- PNWS has been consistently recognized by AWWA and is respected at the national level.
- Board has a good energy level and a desire for engagement and community.
- The Section has a family atmosphere, positive energy toward doing what is best for the industry. Outsiders are impressed that so many members know each other and put the water industry over personal business.
- New members are not intimidated as the Board has not made itself a hierarchy but is viewed as a group that is very welcoming.
- New board members often learn the Trustee role by being on a committee and having contact with a Trustee who models the role.
- Members see themselves as people who can be on the Board even if the role is unclear.
- Networking and relationships/ resources are a huge benefit.
- Being a committee chair creates huge network opportunities.
- Always something to celebrate and work to be proud of.

Identify some areas of growth for the Board:

- Less fractured communication.
- Defined goals – how are we working toward meeting them and how is progress measured?
- Board must maintain oversight of consistent operations (budget etc.) as well as new initiatives.
- Working with predecessors can be helpful.
- Turnover in Chair position each year may result in abandonment of some goals or goals of one year being preempted by current Chair's interests/plans.
- Board dynamics change – chair and chair elect need to work closely for continuity.
- Outside occurrences and influences ebb and flow as well as internal workings.
- National association has initiatives that trickle down.
- Section needs to coordinate with subsections; leaders at subsection level need to know how to move up.
- Times have changed, not all are willing to become involved on their own time if it impacts family and personal time.
- Continue to emphasize friendships and relationships.
- Trying to get people to commit when they are setting boundaries means the position must have some meaning. The power of purpose.
- How do we hold people accountable given the long gaps between meetings.
- Suggestion about regular e-mails from chair, regular "office hours" – the chair may take more responsibility for communication.
- Is there a disengagement between Executive Committee and other Board members?
- Some chairs have provided EC reports (agenda and outcomes) to the entire Board as an FYI.

Other creative ways to reach out to each other

- Develop peer to peer relationships.

- If communication is timely, may encourage members to join in.
- Share communication such as what is going on with committees.
- Encourage Trustees to reach out to committees so their activities can be reported regularly.
- Instead of up and down curves, communication should be a straight line – a sustained level of engagement/commitment.
- New members could be matched up with a specific Trustee, maybe rotating match-ups.
- Make a more attainable goal – communication between 2 or 3 Trustees (“trifectas” rather than entire group. Establish a once a month reach out to another Trustee for a check-in.
- EC makeup – past-chair, incoming chair, AWWA rep. Meetings are not generally open to others for certain topics.
- Executive Director sends communications to all but only hears back from one or two. Can’t fulfill the Board’s objectives if they are not made clear.
- **Take away:** A monthly e-mail from the Chair would be helpful; would remind Trustees of peer-to-peer meetings. Peer to peer Trustee meetings:
 - Start with 30 minutes once a month with a few folks; discuss what’s going on with committees and if there is anything to be addressed from the Chair’s e mail. Chair will match attendees and designate a point person.
 - Make sure you have an objective when you meet to talk, or it will become meaningless.
 - Chair’s proposed monthly “office hours” will put Trustees in Board “mindset” as well as providing opportunity for discussion.
- Chair vs. Executive Director. The ED addresses nuts and bolts. The board sets policy and looks at the big picture – ED shows how to get there. The ED is also here to make Trustee’s lives easier – Trustees don’t have to reinvent wheel as all have full-time jobs and personal lives.
- Check in with Chair for Board direction; other issues are purview of the ED.
- Important to read the monthly e-newsletter.
- The subsections funnel through the SAC – the system is built; Trustees need to take advantage of it.
- **Action: try some things to keep up during the months between meetings.**
 - **Meet with peers once or twice between board meetings**
 - **Chair to produce monthly e-mail and establish office hours.**
- Important to lift up names of potential new leaders.
- New Trustees might benefit from education about financial statements.
- What matters is you are talking to each other, this will help repair the fractured communication.

Leadership Styles and How They Trickle Down - What kind of leadership does this Board want to embody and how will we get there?

Credibility

Accolades
Titles
Who you know
Education/Degrees
Numbers/Results
Impact

Relatability

Why it matters
What you learned
Stories about relationships
What you’re doing with the knowledge
Your process
Emotions you and others felt

- Credibility is safer to lead with – less vulnerability.
- The way you tell your story makes you a great leader. Credibility makes you a great professional.
- Relatability is important in your roles as committee leaders. Share humanity with others as you bring them along.

What role do you see yourself playing in committees? What are the patterns of communication?

Lessons from an exercise:

- Things move along when someone has responsibility.
- Some on committees will have more words than others. How many words should the Trustee have? Everyone should have a voice in the story of your success.
- Seeing a sense of purpose is even more important with younger people, they want to know what they are contributing to success.
- Trustees are liaisons, not part of the committee; there for guidance as needed, as resources and to cheerlead for them.
- Give constructive words to get them moving if needed.
- Look up and out rather than in comfort zone; easy to get into the weeds since you've had the committee role.
- Credibility and reliability are tools in your belt.
- Your input is valuable as a guide to committee chairs.
- Division structure is new and less fractured than previous practice.
- Think about what worked and what didn't when you had a board rep.
- Liaison is someone to make you feel valued as part of the greater organization.
- Part of creating divisions was to align who the person was to the committees they were helping – that brings a little more passion and understanding and connection.
- How to determine whether a committee can look back and determine whether it has been successful?
 - Rotation of leaders
 - Producing income
 - Successful trainings
 - Meeting regularly and being active
- If you look back on the year, what sort of leadership do you want to embody?
 - I was available, I was there
 - I was visible
 - I followed up on things
 - I was a resource

Should Trustee be active at committee meetings?

- Don't want to step on toes, observe what they are doing, ask if they need anything.
- Relationship with chair – be there for meetings, let them know what's coming up from Board level.
- May depend on the committee – some are high-functioning, and you just need to get out of the way, be present & let them run the show as long as they are going in the direction the Board has established for the year.
- Be cheerleaders at the subsection level; subsections appreciate that line of sight to the Board.

- Assist with showing how the committee budget compares to the overall section budget.
- Pre-emptively give some perspective on how your committee fits into the overall subsection and why it matters, e.g., should we challenge ourselves with more training?
- The Treasurer and chair can explain finances (three-legged income stool – committees, conference income, subsidy from AWWA dues).

Where can the Board help itself out if some Trustees are not performing?

- Sometimes can see slippage in activity of committees – need to put extra focus here to help them get on their feet again.
- Make sure the Trustee can function appropriately, help with tools if a committee is struggling.
- Trustees can't be shy with each other. If you have knowledge and are not sharing, you are not helping.
- Encourage members to be more invested and help each other; bring things to each other's attention. Give information and let them do what they want with it.
- Monthly financials are broken down by division; self-regulate by looking at the reports.
- Don't risk productivity and mission in the face of being awkward.
- Where will a story help? Ask if you can add a relevant story for three minutes.

Developing Education and Leadership Training - facilitated dialogue

One of the gaps in the current membership experience is a lack of structured leadership training and education. How can we create young leaders?

- The skills you could be learning within the association will transfer to your career trajectory.
- Leaders are hungry to have their staff do more professional leadership development.
- Consensus there is a lack of a structured leadership and training program for members.
- Have not gone much beyond the Leadership Symposium; what else can we do that is leadership oriented?
- What the Section does spills over to employment places – many are moving toward retirement but not finding anyone to step up; how do we get people to take responsibility and see it as valuable.
- Women in Leadership symposium has moved to PNCWA.
- Hoping to broaden section training as well as leadership training at conferences.
- See what YPs are doing. Try to provide multiple touchpoints, meet people where they are.
- Do we believe that if we build it, they will come?
- Need outside expertise to broaden the scope of training beyond experts in water. The people skills part is important, especially in technical industries.
- Think big picture. The Leadership Symposium was one and done.
 - Another model might be monthly or quarterly.
 - Virtual or in person.
 - Many models exist.
 - Could be credentialed or at least receive a certificate for personnel files, resumes, presenting to managers.
- What is the best model?
 - Symposium

- Utilities have difficulty dedicating funds to send employees away a few times a year for shorter sessions due to coverage, etc. Easier to send someone away for an entire day. Particularly relevant for small utilities.
 - YP Wednesdays have been very successful having experienced people talk about how they got into their roles during one virtual session per month.
 - Most classes tailored for CEUs – Washington will not give credit for fewer than three hours
 - Noted value of in-person training, happening with community gives extra value.
- Whose job is it to create leadership training? Board? Committee? Contractor?
 - When symposium was assigned to an individual with a committee of active individuals, they could not come to decisions on who, what or how to create the program. There was no progress, and the Executive Director took on the task and did all logistics. Resulted in a great success but impossible to do again given the regular ED workload.
 - No one in the industry with a full-time job has the time to dedicate to a major symposium – the topic of leadership is broad.
 - Need structure and someone to concentrate on doing the needed labor; successful model is hiring a consultant to give options to a committee so there are specific choices.
 - Once created, there could be a template and move it around to different locations.
 - Advantageous to have the same person who trains the Board in leadership facilitate membership training, so all are hearing the same thing.
 - Must be budgeted.
 - How do you get the people you want to attend. The Leadership Symposium was so successful there was attitude “if we knew it would be that good, we would have brought more people”. We need to build that reputation and figure out how to target the audience.
 - Pitch to those who are not members, promote for operators, utilities.
 - Do you need CEUs?
 - Consider the amount of time it would take to do it in-house.
 - If the decision is to bring in a consultant, the board will be presented with choices.
 - Most efficient model is an overall decision by the Board with direction to the ED.
 - Do we want a symposium or classes.
 - Piggyback or major stand alone.
 - Will it be moved around or one location.
 - Board could start by establishing a budget and task ED to look at consultant options.
- Get data for the next winter meeting. Figure out scope and perspective, then hire someone to report to ED with a proposal.

What is the next step?

- Do we feel we know what our membership is looking for? There is training offered by other associations which is drawing people into those associations.
 - Could we sponsor some of these and just put our name on it – contributing funds or partnering. Good for visibility but not for being in control.
- The leadership symposium was very successful, but replication will take serious logistics.
- More discussion will take place at the next two meetings, can brainstorm at Executive Committee for options and assign those to Trustee “trifecta” groups of 2 or 3 to discuss; also use “hot topics” time prior to board meetings to discuss.
- YP Summit should be done by YP Committee, not Section.
- Is it a goal or a “would be nice”? Majority say it’s a goal.

Recap of the Day

There is good energy around these ideas and it’s important to pay attention to history in the face of frequent board turnover.

- Last year Trustees brainstormed about what is affecting our section and what gaps should be addressed. Leadership training was ultimately identified as the most “needle-moving” thing we could do for the industry.
- For the next meeting:
 - Budget is the priority topic and can fill in more about leadership training at EC and hot topics meetings. The Executive Committee will bring forward a recommendation for consideration.
 - A virtual meeting in September will be held to approve budget, with formal vote scheduled at following Board meeting.
 - Leadership training will not be in this year’s budget.

Wrap up

The way we say no to each other matters a lot; shooting down makes people feel stupid and they won’t want to come forward in the future. (yes to brain, no to ideas)

- Keep having healthy discourse; make each other feel brilliant and that you deserve to be in the room.
- Enthusiasm from leadership sessions can be dampened when everyday life hits you.
- Think about the way you share information and play this out – let air out of balloon slowly so it stays present.
- Meet more often than you have been – touchpoints – newsletter, office hours, trifectas.
- Bump back up every so often; fuse together factions. Other people see your greatness before you do.
- Trust, camaraderie and work -open your mouth, lead authentically.
- Does it matter, do you really want to do this?
- Come back to goals.
- Chase authentic success – what are the things that actually move the needle. The energy propels you through the gaps when you don’t see each other.

The meeting was recessed at 3:40 until the following day

Chair Belmont opened the meeting at 9:00 on August 2 and reviewed the agenda for the morning.

He noted that with the Section's improved financial status, the budget for training has been expanded to allow the organization to finance some travel expenses for members whose entities cannot pay for their attendance at conferences, and this should encourage more attendees.

Goals for the year - action

- Each Trustee is tasked with reaching out to at least two members personally, one from a subsection and one from a committee with ideally one being an operator (system or plant).
 - Write e-mails thanking them for their service and copy their superior (recognition among peers is very significant).
 - Make sure they are appreciated and emphasize their value to the committee and/or organization.
 - Highlight one of the names and send to Belmont so the individual can be highlighted in Water Matters.
 - Important to get people's names in front of their peers and supervisors, with multiple touchpoints.
 - Phone and send e-mail. If you don't know who they report to, they will have something tangible to add to their employment files. This also means recognizing the employer.
 - Put their contributions specifically into words.
 - Invite them to a training or get them to a conference.
 - Individual touchpoints will create a connection with the Board.

Subsection/Committee Officer Integration at the Fall Training

- Seeing gaps between subsections and committees; it would be helpful to explain roles and relationships.
- Conference provides breakouts with subsections and committees, but people involved in both have to pick one.
- Propose "speed dating" concept where subsections check in with committees to collaborate and communicate and meet more people.
 - About 6 Trustees oversee active divisions; need to facilitate an interaction between subsections and committees.
 - Committee chairs will be with you but you are the facilitator.
- Board members chat with committee leads to see who is attending and encourage them ahead of time.
- Plan on two subsections in front of every committee every 20 minutes.
- Additional Trustees will be available to offer guidance on how to become a Trustee. Let them know there is a Trustee track and how to take advantage of resources that will help them become leaders (website, etc.) It's your opportunity to be a resource.
- If you are focused on your subsection, you may not know how committees work – reach out to appropriate committee and work together.
- "Speed dating" concept will help committees understand how they can assist subsections in their day-to-day tasks.

- Gibson has questions prepared to facilitate conversation and these will be distributed with the agenda.
- Trustees will be “MCs” of various divisions.
- Let them know how they can get financial support.
- Some committees are more active than others and some need help that subsection members may be able to provide. It goes both ways.
- Breakouts are scheduled with subsections and committees.
- Current Treasurer will be working on specific trainings regarding budget and financials, how audits work.
- Discussion regarding one-year term limit for chair
 - Change to bylaws is a big process, needs membership and association approval.
 - Chairs have typically already committed to 5 years of service, 2 as Trustee, then incoming chair, then chair, then past chair
 - Three-year relationship among incoming chair, chair and past chair.
 - Acknowledgement that there is a large learning curve for Trustees and officers.
- Need facilitator for YP session.
- Emphasize importance of bringing YPs into committees and subsections to build for the future.

Preparing for the Fall Trustee Meeting

- 2025-2026 Budget Process and Timeline
 - Budget is being prepared with some conference numbers left to fill in and just a few discrepancies to resolve. Forecasting for next cycle.
 - Executive Committee will meet to review and do final numbers.
 - Trustees will see the budget at the end of August and at that point can ask any questions.
 - Committees generally balance out; some only expend and that’s their purpose.
 - Determine what kind of water quality training is needed.
 - Potential for coordinating committee trainings with subsections.
 - When Trustees receive budget, review for accuracy and share with committees.
 - Division budget can be moved around among committees.
 - Virtual meeting for any last-minute questions, any issues should be resolved before vote at the next Board meeting.

Trustee Role During the Training

- Trustees should be stewards, welcoming to all – be the friendly person who is the connecting person. Make introductions; create ways to facilitate engagement.
- A list of attendees will be available about a month in advance.

Trustee Work Reports

- In advance of the meeting, all Trustees submit division reports that are posted on the website; shows your activities so everyone can see the effort. Past reports remain there and can be used as templates.
- Reports should be submitted about two weeks in advance.

Other Issues or Questions – Wrap Up - Where do we go from here?

- Swag is on order for Fall training.
- Branded clothing at subsection level – all subsections have logos and can budget for it if desired and funded at the subsection level.
- Rooms are reserved for Fall training; Trustees do not have to register but guests should be registered.
- Leadership training options can be discussed at Executive Committee and hot topics, possibly mixed in at the two meetings between now and Fall training.
- This training session was enjoyable; suggest having icebreakers at Fall training and incorporate into other trainings. Organizers will consider this for other meetings if there is time. Morning and post-lunch good times for icebreakers.
- Many noted the excellence of the Trustee leadership sessions in the last two years and observed that we now have the tools and hope to incorporate them in other trainings.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 10:15.