

SIGNATURE
STORY





A SEAT AT THE TABLE

BY SUZI WIRTZ, CAE

It's a simple daily routine: You walk into your kitchen, open a cabinet and decide what to eat for breakfast. You select from three cereals on the shelf. A glass of milk with that? Thanks, but orange juice is more to your liking, and definitely without pulp. Top it off with coffee with extra sugar — make that real sugar. Sound familiar? Not if you are a resident in an assisted living facility, nursing home or even a hospital. For these folks, menu and dining decisions often are made by other people. In many cases, those other people are certified dietary managers.

“Our members, the majority of whom work in health care fields, are specialized in dietary training different from nurses, doctors and others who care for hospital, nursing home, assisted living and rehab residents,” says Bill St. John, CAE, president and CEO of the Dietary Managers Association. “The irony, though, is how much they are responsible for; it’s so much more than menus.

“As their professional organization, DMA administers a credential, the CDM®, CFPP® [Certified Dietary Manager, Certified Food Protection Professional] and we offer education through a variety of media,” he says. “But the world was changing before our eyes in recent years. People are living longer and living healthier; the people entering these facilities are changing in terms of dietary needs and desires. It was clear that dietary managers could be in a very good position to make a difference to a lot of people. However, our members needed a seat at a table of leaders, not managers, in order to live out DMA’s mission of providing optimum nutritional care through foodservice management.”

In order to move the members from managers to leaders, however, some seats at yet another table had to change — the DMA’s board of directors.

“We realized that our members would be better served by a more diverse board with the expertise to stay ahead of industry change,” St. John says. “At the literal end of the day, the people at *their* tables will be better served because they have access to that broad knowledge base and have become leaders in their field.”

To that end, in the past year DMA developed four core initiatives that resulted in the alteration of its board make-up, criteria for board selection and increased staff involvement and accountability. In addition, DMA’s first leadership institute will take place later this year.

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

The realization that St. John alludes to began several years ago with one simple strategic question: “How do we ensure the long-term life of DMA and make sure we stay ahead of the curve?” The answer was far from simple and required changes to DMA’s structure and philosophy.

The health care facilities in which the majority of DMA members work have strict government regulations and tight budgets. Combine that with the aging American population within the same timeframe, and DMA had its work cut out for it with respect to elevating its members’ visibility and credibility.

DMA members’ client base, for the most part, is people older than 62. According to the Assisted Living Federation of America (with information summarized from the U.S. Census Bureau), the population of people 85 and older is expected to increase by 33.2 percent from 2000 to 2010. The net worth of older people also has increased significantly: They can afford to live either in nursing homes or assisted living facilities — and they are used to a higher quality of life and food. Finally, according to an August 2006 article in *Nursing Homes Magazine*, author and DMA member Robin Gaines says, “Today, more than 12,000 CDMs, CFPPs work throughout the United States. Many have built a broad base of experience in nursing homes and are now crossing over to the assisted living industry to apply their expert-



Steven Daab, director of food and beverage, and David Randazzo, executive director, Claridge Court retirement facility in Prairie Village, Kan.

ise. Food is pivotal to the assisted living industry. It tops nearly every consumer checklist for facilities and, if done right, serves as a marketing magnet.”

In conjunction with DMA’s November 2006 executive committee meeting, St. John planned a strategic thinking session to discuss what all these trends and demographic shifts would mean for DMA’s members and how staff and the board could better prepare them to meet the challenges.

“In addition to the executive committee, Bill invited a number of people who had not just an interest in DMA’s success, but a great knowledge of the health care industry,” says Ken Wasco, DMA member and senior marketing manager of professional development for Gordon Food Service. Wasco, an industry expert, also served as facilitator at that meeting. People like Steven Daab, CDM, CFPP, for instance, were invited to attend the session. Daab serves as director of food and beverage at Claridge Court, a continuing care retirement community in Prairie Village, Kan. He had been a DMA member for only three years at that time, but was viewed by DMA staff as an “undiscovered” member, someone who had real leadership potential but had yet to be recognized. Traditionally, a lay member would not be involved strategically in DMA decisions, especially not at a board level. However, things were about to change.

“We shared information at that meeting on how we saw the look of the world in 2010 — all relative to foodservice and health care and we stressed that the need to hire competent people was going to increase,” Wasco says.

The truth is that DMA hadn’t focused on the changing trends and demographics up to this point. “The demographics are there,” Wasco says. “People aren’t living to 70, they’re living to 90. You’ve got this industry — foodservice — and it’s a continuum of care. Acute care hospitals and skilled care nursing homes are the last phase of life, but what about when Mom and Dad aren’t ill? Assisted living facilities really came into play. So now the dietary manager can’t just serve sick people food, they have to serve people who are well food. Healthy people know what they like and they say it. In fact, some places were looking to employ chefs and high-level dietitians. These current and forecasted changes have tremendous implications on the role and practice of dietary managers.”

Wasco and the DMA senior staff laid all this out for the participants to review and digest. “All of a sudden everyone came to the realization almost simultaneously: DMA members needed to become leaders, no longer just be managers,” Wasco says.

During the three-day discussions, everyone in attendance was encouraged to chime in: veteran board members who had held leadership positions for decades, newcomers like Daab, and non-member industry experts. In fact, it was critical that Daab and the nonmembers voice their opinions in order to compel change for the organization.

“I felt I was there to spur the conversation forward as opposed to rehashing old topics,” he says. “I got a feeling early on that I was there to break a paradigm and not just do business as usual. I took energy from that, and I had some definite ideas about moving the leadership forward specifically.”

ABOUT DMA

DMA, based in St. Charles, Ill., is a national nonprofit association with more than 14,000 professionals dedicated to the mission of providing optimum nutritional care through foodservice management. DMA is the premier resource for foodservice managers, directors, and those aspiring to careers in foodservice management. DMA achieves its mission through education, advocacy, networking and research. Most DMA members work in health care — nursing homes, rehab facilities, senior living communities or hospitals. Some work in correctional facilities, schools and the military. In health care settings, dietary managers often run food and nutrition departments, typically working in tandem with registered dietitians and other members of the health care team. They may provide supportive nutrition screening, documentation and care planning. Because of their intensive training in management and human resources administration, some dietary managers oversee multiple service-oriented departments (e.g., laundry, housekeeping, and others) within their organizations. Others work for corporations in areas such as multi-site management of food-service operations, employee training or sales.

THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS

During that meeting and in response to all the information put before them, the board and senior staff developed four core initiatives and, from those four, felt that two were the frontrunners in terms of needing urgent action. They were: to prepare members to excel as leaders and to strengthen the governance structure to best serve the association.

“We had heard from members that they generally felt underappreciated and undervalued in their positions, so the concept of grooming them to be leaders really resonated with everyone,” says Kate Dockins, director of leadership development. “Initially, that was the initiative that came ‘first.’ However, after some intense discussion, we decided we had to put the necessary governance changes in place to support such an initiative. Therefore, governance took priority, but preparing members to excel was not far behind.”

“Our members needed to be more empowered, more knowledgeable and more confident,” St. John says. “We needed to help them reach that level, and it really became clear that we had to start with a change in our board make-up.”

Since its inception in 1960, DMA board members were required to “come up through the ranks,” a tradition shared by many associations. The DMA board members had to be seen as doing their time and putting in leadership hours at both the local and state levels. DMA felt this model would no longer be effective if the organization was to move forward.

“We needed new blood,” Daab says. “Take someone like me. I had no desire to be a state leader within the organization, but I have nearly 30 years’ experience in a hotel foodservice setting. With that experience comes great knowledge; and I can cut to the quick. If you change the face of the board with an infusion of new talent, you potentially are opening up the opportunity for different current members to be involved, or people who are not members who want to be involved. Essentially, we were limiting the talent pool.”

Action was needed and two committees were immediately formed to pursue that action: the board evolution committee and the leadership development committee. Both were small, no more than five members on each. Additionally, each consisted of at least one current DMA board member, one lay member and one staff liaison.

“Everyone agreed that all were equal players on the team,” St. John says.

The board evolution committee produced several goals: to research governance trends within similar associations; to develop a framework/criteria for a different-looking board; and to present that framework to the current board for a vote which, if in favor of a new structure, would require a bylaws change.

“That was another reason we needed to speed up on that initiative,” Dockins says. “We were hopeful that it would pass and that we could get the bylaws updated in time for the next voting cycle, following our annual meeting in July.”

Hopeful is one thing; making things happen is quite another. The committee did its homework swiftly, contacting several other associations and gathering information on board structure, board job descriptions and qualifications as well as nomination process options. They completed this process via several conference calls and, at the next board meeting just two months later,

the results of the committee's progress were presented.

"This was one of the most gratifying committee involvements I've experienced, not only because we worked efficiently but the tight timeframe pushed us to dive into critical conversations about the leadership needed to advance our association," Dockins says. "I feel privileged to be part of this dynamic evolution in DMA."

The next step in the evolution would prove to be the most important in the process: proposing a new model for the DMA board of directors and presenting that model to the board in June 2007, just in time for the July annual meeting.

During the research phase, the committee discovered there were some very talented people in the industry who simply were not DMA members, but who could bring new ideas to the board and benefit the entire membership.

"There are many people out there who are related to our industry, but who do not have the desire to be full-fledged DMA members," St. John says. "If they were on our board, they could lend leadership qualities since many have prior experience on other boards. They could offer a different perspective and we really hoped our members could learn from them."

To that end, the model proposed by the committee in June 2007 included six nonmembers; previously the board consisted solely of DMA members. Additionally, of the 10 board members who would need to be DMA members, three would not be required to have held prior leadership positions within the organization. The board's executive committee met six weeks before the board meeting to understand and support what a new board structure would look like.

"All the information was compiled by staff and given to us," says Vicky Kearney, CDM, CFPP, current DMA chair of the board

TO THAT END, THE MODEL PROPOSED BY THE COMMITTEE IN JUNE 2007 INCLUDED SIX NONMEMBERS; PREVIOUSLY THE BOARD CONSISTED SOLELY OF DMA MEMBERS. ADDITIONALLY, OF THE 10 BOARD MEMBERS WHO WOULD NEED TO BE DMA MEMBERS, THREE WOULD NOT BE REQUIRED TO HAVE HELD PRIOR LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION.



and dietary services consultant for Armstrong Nutrition Management. "As chair, I visited the St. Charles office to work on the plans and was in contact with Bill and the staff by phone and e-mail. While on the board in previous positions, I certainly saw the need for these changes so I guess that makes me a champion for this initiative.

"Any association that does not constantly look to the future and structure itself to meet the changing needs of its members will find itself with a shrinking membership," Kearney adds.

Even so, the board meeting was full of discussion about the proposed changes.

"There was concern about the proposed model," says Marla Isaacs, CAE, vice president of professional programs. "To compound matters, this was an audited meeting — meaning general members could attend and speak up."

"This, however, proved to be enormously helpful," Dockins says. "And fascinating to watch, too. The general members really supported the change and spoke up in favor of it, even while some members were saying, 'But, I did my time, they should, too.'"

"We knew there would be potential resistance, but that was the reason we had done our homework, the due diligence," St. John says.

In the end, the proposed model was amended only slightly before passing unanimously: rather than six nonmember seats, there were only four. The prior experience factor remained unchanged.

"With that minor change, the board felt true ownership in the process and in the final decision," St. John says.

"The board as a whole got behind this change and we understood that it would only strengthen the association as it is now and where we will be in the future," Kearney says.

The necessary bylaws change was then put before the membership, the vote passed and, just 12 months after the initial meeting, a new board selection process began, bringing new leaders to the table.

Timothy L. Bauman, CDM, CFPP, director of food and nutrition services at Wood County Hospital in Ohio, was another DMA member involved in the board evolution process. He states, "It is to the benefit to the organization and profession to have a strong board. A variety of industry viewpoints from a well-trained board requires continuing work. The strategic thinking session I was involved in further enhanced DMA's ability to do effective succession planning by developing today's and tomorrow's leaders."

STAFF IS ON THE MENU, TOO

As Kearney notes, "The changes made in the board structure will strengthen not only the board, but will also empower the staff to move DMA forward."

St. John and the other senior staff involved at the board level were understandably enthusiastic. After all, they had lived through the entire process. But, what needed to happen next was to get the entire staff involved and equally excited.

"We wanted everyone to feel the change, to become more strategic-thinking and accountable," Isaacs says.

In order to even begin to address the leadership initiative, the staff had to become invested.

MEASURING TRADE SHOW SUCCESS:

More Than Counting Participants



By Kevin O'Neill