

## Call me

### ***I don't take time to answer the phone; I save time answering the phone.***

I don't get enough calls from members of our organization. I would like to share a few thoughts about this problem in the hope that some members might call me.

I think CEOs of many professional associations often fall into bad habits. Some of them think they are too important or too busy to talk to members. They become so distant that their vision becomes skewed. They have lots of meetings. They go to important lunches. They worry about what wine to serve at dinner. They create too many committees and hurry from one meeting to another at the annual conference, knocking over members along their way. Some have a Board that wants the CEO to write reports, go to committee meetings, and spend time buying etched glass for the office door that few members will ever see. Your organization does not have that kind of Board.

When I am at a conference, I don't go to breakout sessions. I only go to (most) general sessions because I have to. I would rather go to the registration desk, our booth, or to the lobby. I like to sit and wait for someone to come by and talk. If no one stops by, I might just go up and start up a conversation. I get a kick out of the people who clearly look puzzled as to why a stranger walked up and asked how the meeting was going for them. When those that don't know me ask, or are told who I am, they have an entertaining reaction. They have this "Why aren't you out doing something important?" look. It's really quite ironic, because what they really want is for their organization to be concerned about them and not wine, etched glass, or dithering committees.

We have two receptionists in the office. When a third call comes in, it rolls over to most every phone in the office (we have 27 staff). The rule is, stop what you are doing and answer it. That goes for everyone, including the CFO and CEO. If I can beat them to the call, everyone gets a not-so-gentle reminder to answer it. I can't believe the number of companies, let alone professional associations, that have the phone immediately roll over to some automatic answering system. I think every one of them should have, "Please press 1 to resign from this organization, because we don't really care." Don't get me started.

The reason we do what we do is because we don't believe in pressing 1 or even going to voicemail. We are far from perfect, but we do all we can. One of the interesting aspects of this is when I do answer (a couple times a week), I mention my first name and ask "How can I help you." A lot of people don't know me, but when they do, I can tell, because there is a long pause. It's not "computing" for them. Some ask what I am doing answering the phone. It's particularly funny when it is a Board member, making a random call to the staff. I tell them essentially what I am telling you in this article.

We hate voicemail and we hate pressing 1, so we don't want to do it to others. It kills me how many people want to talk to a human being when they make a call, but when they go to their job, they have to go to a machine. We are also sending a message to the staff that service is everything. If there were no other reason for my answering the phone than the message this sends to the staff, it would still be worth it. We represent the members. Nothing is more important than the members. Some might think that I should have more important things to do, but they would be wrong. I have a lot of important things, and I get most of those things done. However, a couple phone calls a week isn't going to bring the system to its knees. As a matter of fact, I often learn something that can save us all a lot of

time. I find out what the members are interested in. More often, I find out their problems and I find out their opinions. Sometimes I find out a common problem that a simple system change can fix. We then free up staff time for other things, because we reduce the time on fixing problems. I don't take time to answer the phone. I save time answering the phone, so call me.

I got a call from a member yesterday who specifically wanted to talk to me. It doesn't happen enough. This one was particularly interesting. She wanted to let me know she thought it was a mistake that we discontinued the Audit Committee of the Board conference. We were losing money on it, but the conference was a real benefit to those who could get their Board to go. Dan Roach, who was the biggest advocate for this important member service, had just told me two days earlier that we should bring back the conference. I told him he was killing me with this fiscally imprudent idea. I asked him if he had heard about the recession. The truth of the matter was, we are having our best year ever because we cut a lot of unnecessary expenses. At the moment this person called, we were in a position to reconsider some of the cuts.

I told the caller about that conversation. I also told her that I had seen a couple of e-mails in our general e-mail box, asking where the conference went (more about that general e-mail box later.) I told her I would call Dan. We decided to try the conference one more time. There was a lot of input, but that one call, from one member, pushed that decision over the top. In fact, that was the second time a fiscally questionable but helpful conference was reinstated by a single member making a single call, so call me.

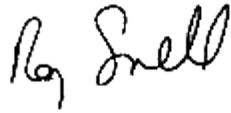
To maintain any shred of integrity, I must make a confession right about here. Many of the phone calls result in the following phrase: "I am sorry, but there is nothing we can do about that." However, we can often do something, but not quite what they're asking. Quite often we do something later, when conditions change, but we would never have done it if the one call was not made. Most often, the main outcome of the call was to clarify something that was not well understood. Just to be clear, you will often get a long and heartfelt explanation about why we can't do anything about your problem or your idea for change, but call me.

We have a general e-mail address on the website that gets about seven or eight e-mails a day. I get copied on them. I scan the topics for a theme or unique issues I should help with. I learn a lot about what going on. Soon after I started getting the general e-mails, I was seeing a lot of good feedback (e.g., log in troubles) from the members. I asked if we could do anything about the log in problems, but no one had any ideas. I soon determined that if seeing these e-mails was helpful to me, it would be helpful for others in the office to see them. I had all the supervisors copied on all the e-mails to the general e-mail box. Very soon after that, a staff member saw a common theme to the log in problems and we made a change. The volume of e-mails dropped. Some things cannot be seen from far away. You have to get up close and think about it over time to see an opportunity. Being constantly connected to the members is a good thing, so call me.

Notice I didn't say e-mail me. I hate typing. I can't tell the difference between a dangling modifier and a mortified participle. So call me if you can, but e-mails will work too. I would tell you there are no dumb questions, but it's been done; however, it's very true. I would tell you that there are no unimportant questions, and I hope that you believe me. What you really need to believe is that there is always time. It is very important to stay in touch and be grounded. I am ready and waiting, so call me.

- My cell phone is 612 709-6012

- My direct line is 952 933-8009
- [roy.snell@corporatecompliance.org](mailto:roy.snell@corporatecompliance.org)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roy Snell". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**P.S.**

Just as I finished this article, I answered a call. It was ironic. The member wanted a sample template for a Board compliance report. Our receptionists are trained to help with these requests. However, I was able to walk him through a website search which resulted in both of us learning something. We discovered that most of what we had was PowerPoint presentations on the subject. Then it dawned on me that few people would share their Board compliance report for obvious reasons. He said all they needed to do was to post a template, implying it should have been donated by now. However, most people would not take the time to turn their report into a template. Even if they had one, they may not even want the template on the Internet. I told him that when he got his Board report done, he should turn it into a template and, if necessary, he could have our staff post it anonymously. Now my mind is churning about a number of related issues that could result in actions that will improve our services. It also is an example of one other thing you should know about calling me. It can result in me asking you to do something for us. So beware, but call me.