

## **Success by Association**

by Michael G. Steger

*What does “belonging” mean to you?*

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What does “belonging” mean to you? Does it mean that you are blending into the woodwork along with all the other “belongers,” or does it mean that you are able to build upon the “strength in numbers” mindset? There are so many different takes on being a member of a professional association that one could write a book on it, and in fact, I am certain many have been written on the subject.

People say they don’t have time to commit to being part of an organization. But the reality is that professional organizations are like food for the professional body; we require the nourishment that interaction with others in our field provides. We take that “nourishment” back with us to our schools and use that energy to breathe new life into what may have been a stagnant or undernourished project, department, etc.

The positives of knowing other people in your field are numerous. Networking is important in every field, even ours! Having contact numbers for and relationships established with others gives you carte blanche to call on them when you need help solving a problem. Being able to “drop a name” can often bring others that know you into the organization. True leaders recognize that we need other people to help us get our jobs done, outside help is critical to keeping a fresh look on our organizations, and you never know when you might need to call on someone to look for work... or be called upon to help someone else find gainful employment.

While I generally do not care for the term “best practices,” it does sound better than “well, that’s how we do it here, and it worked!” Professional associations offer the golden opportunity to meet with a group and capture the collective brain trust that comes with it. We must recognize that we don’t have all the answers, and there is much to gain from being a part of these meetings and conferences. Truly seeing how a success story evolved at another institution is usually enough for me to put some form of that idea into practice. We also look to our aspirant institutions and work to model our organizations and our way of doing business after them... imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The gathering of ideas such as these could not be attained without being part of something that offers a forum for institutions to present their best practices.

Another primary benefit of being part of a professional organization is the professional development aspect. The educational opportunities that are offered are usually perfect for your field. Make sure to become a member of an association that most directly relates to your field. If you are not an energy engineer or manager and have little or nothing to do with energy engineering or management, it does not make sense to get involved with a group that focuses on that field. There are strong organizations for different segments of [management], and it may be smartest if different members of your team belong to different organizations. Have them attend their educational

conferences and come back and share their knowledge with others in your department. The sharing of new information can only help to lift up a [department].

Don't be fooled into thinking that simply belonging is enough, though. Have you ever noticed that the same names seem to come up with certain organizations? These people are probably keeping that group alive, and without them or new people stepping in to help out, the organization would wither away. I have seen it firsthand, I know, and it is painful when one has invested so much time in launching and propelling a group only to have it die. Get involved in the inner workings of a group that interests you, or one you may already be a passive member of. The rewards are many and the time invested is just that, an investment in your own professional standing.

I encourage anyone who is on the sidelines to get involved in any related organization near you. The rewards are too many to list and the drawbacks are too few to mention.

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