

A Boost

That Benefits Everybody

In four years, BOMA-Atlanta has enjoyed double- and triple-digit growth in a host of categories. The secret to its expansion is a smart strategy and a staff and board willing to work together to implement it.

By Jean S. Frankel

In times of crisis, smart leaders are able to effect changes in ways that can become profound, institutionalized, and lasting. That's definitely true for the staff and member leaders of the Building Owners and Managers of Atlanta (BOMA-Atlanta), a trade association focused on commercial-real-estate professionals that has enjoyed impressive growth during the worst of times for its members' industry. During the past four years, the association has increased membership every year, growing a total of 21 percent. Event attendance has grown 33 percent and revenue by 21 percent. Education enrollment increased a whopping 213 percent.

What contributed to this success? One of the keys was the transition to an enabling, effective, and energizing governance culture. The organization has also implemented several new strategic initiatives, including developing a human-resources-management certificate program, training for medical-office building managers, young professionals' events, and a new grassroots advocacy system. BOMA-Atlanta has also partnered with its international affiliate, BOMA International, to create and launch the "Foundations of Real Estate Management" course, a comprehensive educational program designed for property professionals.

While BOMA-Atlanta was going through a critical organizational change, so was its young executive director, Gabriel Eckert, CAE. Promoted from within and stepping into the role during a difficult time for the organization, Eckert has earned praise for his management of the organization.

"Gabriel has brought about trust, loyalty, and undying support among not only our leadership and staff but our entire membership as a whole," says Florence Barbour, regional vice president with Winthrop Management and a past president of BOMA-Atlanta. "He has made our association strong financially and has earned the respect of the entire membership. The best

decision we ever made was to put him in charge."

Setting Goals

In 2005, BOMA-Atlanta was at a crossroads. It had survived management transitions and financial turbulence, and there was a low level of trust between staff and member leaders. Members questioned the value of the organization,

and the association was not moving forward strategically. There was no shortage of effort, but each effort acted alone instead of in concert with others toward a key objective. There was no dominant, long-term goal other than to simply exist.

Fortunately, BOMA-Atlanta had a strong group of volunteers. There was willingness on the part of leadership to grow and change, even if that meant some short-term pain. And there was an understanding among the leaders that BOMA-Atlanta needed to refocus to become a greater organization.

"There are only a few of us who remember what it was like before we operated under strategic governance," says current association president Linda Beauchamp, RPA, senior property manager with Cousins Properties. "Before, you'd attend a board meeting and everything was already decided on and approved. The board gave the appearance of only sitting back and listening. Board members didn't feel as though they had a whole lot of input."

"Back before 2006, BOMA-Atlanta was governed by an 'operational format model,'" adds Barbour. "We considered mostly current operational issues and annual programs without the forward thinking on where we want to take our organization in the near future and in future years to come."

When Eckert signed on as the executive director in 2006, he had been with the organization for about two years as a communications specialist. In the top staff leadership role, he had to balance two tasks: transforming the organization's culture while simultaneously making his own career transformation. As Eckert was shaping his own transition strategies (see sidebar on page 26), he also had to assemble a new staff team. (The staff now consists of six full-time employees, including Eckert.)

"Right from the start, I wanted to create a culture of inclusion," Eckert says. "A culture where we as staff would share in and be committed to the organization's success. I also focused on role clarity between members and staff and

TEN STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

Gabriel Eckert, CAE, executive director of BOMA-Atlanta, lists 10 key change strategies he implemented to help the organization expand:

1. Create a shared vision. Our board of directors and senior staff collaborated to produce a written, focused, and strategic long-term plan. We created the plan together, and the vision that we share about what success will look like for BOMA-Atlanta is something we are all equally bought into.

2. Base governance on proven association management theory. We instituted governance change based on the book *The Will to Govern Well*. Jean Frankel was able to not only facilitate our process but also to advise and consult on best practices in other associations. As a result, our board began to focus on strategy and making knowledge-based decisions a routine part of how we did business.

3. Define success. We create a shared understanding of what success looks like in advance of each year and put it in writing. Success is largely achieved by implementing our two strategic priorities each year. Membership numbers, event attendance, education enrollment, and other association benchmarks may go up or down in a given year, but if we are implementing the right strategy, these benchmarks will all trend upward.

4. Prioritize. We choose a maximum of two strategic priorities each year, and we don't try to tackle the entire strategic plan in one year.

5. Maintain focus. One of the most important and difficult things for an association to do is maintain focus. We maintain focus on our strategic plan. Members often share many great (and some not-so-great) ideas with the association's leadership. Discussing the need for organizational focus is a powerful tool in helping members understand the strategic direction of the association.

6. Create distinct roles. We create a shared understanding of the role of the board, committees, and staff, and we also discuss roles prior to implementing projects. I like to say that when members focus on what members are good at and staff focuses on what staff is good at, great things happen. Members bring a deep understanding of their profession, relationships within the industry, and a strong desire to engage in meaningful organizational work. Staff brings a set of technical and strategic skills relating to competencies of association management and an understanding of how each committee's work and all staff efforts tie into the overall strategic direction of the association.

7. Empower others. The board empowers committees and staff to implement the strategic priorities and the ongoing work of the organization.

8. Share information. The board and executive director are transparent in making decisions. This is a key to building trust within the organization.

9. Reinforce the link between board governance and organizational outcomes. We highlight for the board how the decisions it makes in terms of strategy, priorities, and vision result in success for the organization.

10. Celebrate success. We routinely celebrate achieving goals and milestones with members and staff. This helps build a culture of inclusion and fun.

on creating an environment where the board focuses on strategy, priorities, and vision rather than on getting into the details of staff and committee work. I believe that success comes most effectively when members and staff are given the autonomy to do what they do best.”

“Each staff member knows what they are responsible for and to what capacity they are lending their expertise toward the overall well-being of the organization,” says Erin Hall, BOMA-Atlanta’s director of communications and marketing. “This allows each staff member to contribute in equal but separate ways. It allows staff members to stay focused and not get thrown off course easily, and it helps keep our office free from petty office politics than can plague any office environment. Every person fits into the organization in a very special way. We each bring different ideas and considerations to the table, all while

understanding that the reason we exist is to increase the professionalism and value of our members.”

Transformative Leadership

Eckert says BOMA-Atlanta’s leadership hadn’t reached a consensus on strategic governance when he took the executive-director position. “The board was still operating with a primary focus on minutia and details, and it was managing staff and committees,” he says. “As a result, there wasn’t really a group in the organization setting strategy, vision, and priorities. We were moving down the road, but there were still a lot of questions about how best to approach the transition and how to create buy-in and commitment.”

To do that, Eckert worked to draw links whenever possible between board discussions, policies, and actions that ultimately would support the strategic plan. He also

encouraged the board to focus on only one or two strategic priorities at a time. Every year, Eckert works with consultants from the firm Ideas for Action to design and facilitate a two-day retreat where the leadership team meets as a group and plans for the upcoming year.

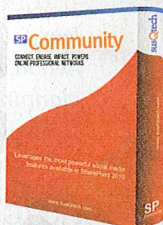
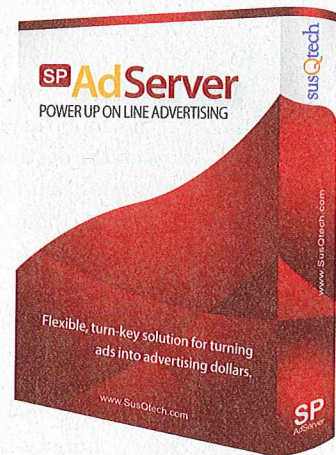
“The focus of this retreat is to determine where we are as an organization, where we have been, and where we have yet to grow,” says Hall. “And then, specifically, we select two strategic goals for the following year. Focusing only on these two large-scale goals in a given year ensures that we are able to meet the everyday demands and needs of our members while maintaining forward progression for BOMA-Atlanta.”

Hall says many associations struggle with success because they try to do too many things too quickly and without focus. “Those issues typically surface because clear lines aren’t defined

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To watch video of Gabriel Eckert, CAE, discussing some of the keys to BOMA-Atlanta's rapid growth, visit www.asacenter.org/associationsnow and click the "Now Online" tab.



internally amongst staff members—who is charge of what—and also because there is no strategic growth model to follow," she says. "But BOMA-Atlanta follows a very organized and focused governance structure that allows our board of directors to be creative and develop ideas in a way that ensures our association's growth without taking on too much too fast."

"It was a long process to make this stick," says Eckert. "But one way we were able to make progress was introduction of the idea that we all share a common destiny. We as a staff share a common destiny with the organization. If the organization is successful, we're successful in sharing that success with members. [Sharing success means] having a shared vision and goals that everyone buys into, recognizing and valuing the strengths that members and staff bring to the organization, and celebrating accomplishments such as achieving goals and

“Each staff member knows what they are responsible for and to what capacity they are lending their expertise toward the overall well-being of the organization.” —Erin Hall

milestones. We also instituted written objectives for staff and committees to make sure everybody is aligned in the same direction with our strategic plan.”

Looking Forward

BOMA-Atlanta's emphasis on deliberate and strategic growth has allowed the organization to enjoy a culture of sustained success. "At the end of each year, we have a laundry list of success stories because we begin each year with clearly defined objectives, and we have the tools and support from our board to get those things done," says Hall. "After we have defined these objectives, we rely heavily

on our members and committees to take these goals and get them done through another tier of strategic planning. And in my experience, I've found that success breeds more success. Once we finish one priority, we reset our focus and move on to the next thing. It's exciting to navigate through these processes because you can look at our organization historically and see exactly what we have accomplished each year."

"There's never a shortage of good ideas," says Eckert. "However, there is a limit to staff and member resources or ability to address every one of those ideas. So instead of setting ourselves up for failure by taking on too much, we will continue to focus intensely on our goals and get them done. This elevates the culture of success and the spirit of pride in BOMA-Atlanta that follows."

Hall agrees, saying BOMA-Atlanta is able to see more sustained success because of the structure and culture BOMA-Atlanta has built under Eckert's guidance.

"Many associations do many things well," Hall says. "Because of the structure of our strategic governance model, BOMA-Atlanta is able to tackle a few lofty goals each year and see those goals through to the end, ultimately to success."

Slow and steady wins the race. BOMA-Atlanta's transformed culture embraces shared vision, engenders high levels of trust, and celebrates success together. That's its destiny. **an**

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Gabriel Eckert, CAE, executive director of BOMA-Atlanta, lists five tips for association staff hoping to move into a staff-leader role:

- 1. First things first.** Become an expert in your functional area before becoming a generalist in association management. Exhibiting a strong skill set in your area of responsibility (communications, education, meeting planning, and so forth) builds credibility and a solid foundation for your career. Also, producing results for the organization in your area of expertise will get you noticed.
- 2. Focus on the destination.** Everyone does things a little differently. Agree on the outcome of a project and then give your staff the creative freedom to do things differently than you would do. This creates more ownership of projects and engagement in the organization. Remember, many roads can lead to the same destination.
- 3. Ask for help. A lot.** Building a strong professional network is a key to success in association management. Utilizing your network is essential. Great association executives ask a lot of questions and aren't afraid to ask for help from colleagues, coworkers, and members when they need it.
- 4. Create a shared vision.** Co-create with member leaders a shared vision of the future based on the organization's strategic plan that members and staff equally support. Speak of it often, in a way that creates a picture of the future in the minds of those to whom you are speaking. Then, put the vision into action by engaging committees and staff in accomplishing measurable goals.
- 5. Build a team.** Create a culture of inclusion by listening to your coworkers and members, being transparent in decision making, and recognizing others for their contributions regularly. Members and staff produce the best results and have the most fun when they are sincerely valued as part of a team.