

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

On Leadership: Balancing Our Values with Our Obligations to Those We Represent

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Since I've been in Nevada, I've had the good fortune to serve on several boards of directors for a number of wonderful organizations. Most recently, I have had the honor to serve as an officer and now president of the State Bar of Nevada. In that 20-plus year period, I have learned a tremendous amount about what it means to lead an organization and what a representative owes those whom they lead. Specifically, I have come to some understanding of where the lines are between personal belief and the obligation that representatives have to all their members – even those with whom they may personally disagree. I've also learned that this tension is as ancient as it is universal. Yet, how do we navigate this?

On one end of the continuum is an idea that was best espoused by Edmund Burke, a member of the British Parliament in the 18th century:

Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion . . .

Inherent in this quote is the idea that those who represent others are closest to the issues and problems that organizations face and should use that proximity to exercise informed judgment, even if different from the sentiments of those whom they represent.

On the other end of this debate is a quote I heard in Steven Spielberg's wonderful movie, "Lincoln (2012)," where Honest Abe is speaking frankly with Thaddeus Stevens, leader of the Republicans in Congress, who is advocating an uncompromising version

of Reconstruction following the Civil War. Stevens claimed that the moral compass of southerners was broken and that he and his fellow Republicans would take it upon themselves to "repair it" through harsh policy aimed at rooting out the "heritage of traitors:"

A compass, I learnt when I was surveying, it'll ... it'll point you True North from where you're standing, but it's got no advice about the swamps and deserts and chasms that you'll encounter along the way. If, in pursuit of your destination, you plunge ahead, heedless of obstacles, and achieve nothing more than to sink in a swamp ... What's the use of knowing True North?

To understand Lincoln is to know that policy and practicality always seemed to go hand in hand in his mind. Lincoln seemed to feel deeply that accomplishing one's goal by slowly convincing others to rally to your cause was much more likely to succeed than directing action from your own perspective and forcing others to accept your personal values on a particular issue. Incidentally, for more on Lincoln's ideas on leadership, I strongly recommend "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln," by Doris Kearns Goodwin, which explores these themes in greater depth.

Against this framework, I've always tried to make sense of these points of view and incorporate them into my decision-making and approach.

For me, the idea that resonates most is recognizing that members of a board have fiduciary responsibilities. When I act as part of a board, I act in what should be the best interests of the entire organization. Thus, to my mind, my strong feelings or my values are not what matter most on a particular issue – it is what is best for everyone. In the case of the State Bar of Nevada that means doing what is best for each of its 11,000 members in Nevada and throughout the nation. It is fair to say that the views of our membership generally fall on just about every side of every issue, and I believe deeply that all viewpoints (particularly ones I personally happen not to share) must be respected. For us to serve our membership properly and faithfully, we can do no less.

In my years as a member of the Board of Governors, I can say that no matter what issue was under consideration, when the board reached a consensus in its discussions, my fellow board members and I have consistently treated that consensus as an action of our entire board speaking with one voice. This acceptance is part and parcel of the fiduciary obligations that must govern our conduct as leaders. We must respect the collective actions of the institutions we serve.

Our membership can be proud of the thoughtful work done by the Board of Governors. We, too, have diverse viewpoints on issues of the day, yet can disagree without being disagreeable. And, when our board makes a decision, I am gratified to know that our board's members will stand by it and continue to convey the idea that we speak with one voice.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that the viewpoints we consider do not start and end with the board and its members – we are not an echo chamber, where only our own opinions tend to reinforce each other. Each meeting of the board contains sections for public comment, and all participants are encouraged to speak directly to us on any issue of concern. Our board takes this commentary seriously and all who participate are heard. Indeed, important policy changes and other board actions have arisen from the comments of state bar members who took a moment to tell us what was on their minds.