

New Presidents Conference Highlights: A State Bar Out of Touch—Ouch



John T. Berry

Ouch. It always stings to get criticism even if it is constructive and well intentioned. It hurts even worse down the line, however, if you don't listen.

When the new presidents of the state's local bar associations met last month with the leadership of the State Bar there was candid, pointed criticism about how the State Bar of Michigan could be serving its membership better. I salute the leadership of this Bar for encouraging this uncomfortable, but long-overdue dialogue.

Let there be no mistake: the State Bar of Michigan has been and continues to be one of the leading bar associations in the nation. But resting upon a fine reputation is a sure formula for decline. Especially in the face of rapid changes in the delivery of legal services and in the economics of the practice of law, business as usual is not an option. Those of

you who fly know that if a plane starts to nosedive a warning buzzer goes off, signaling that it is time to wake up and take action. Well, the buzzer has sounded. It is time to pull up and start climbing.

It is time for the State Bar of Michigan to rekindle a passion for helping its membership, the lawyers and judges who are part of our judicial system, because helping you to practice more efficiently is a surefire way to help the public we all serve. The most persistent message you have been sending us is the need for assistance in adjusting to an ever-changing market.

It is time to find those things that unite us as a unified bar and to make sure that we are concentrating our time, energy, money, and resources on just those things.

At the New Presidents Conference, it was clear the Bar is ready to face the challenge. President Tom Ryan said, "We know we have made mistakes and we are ready to embrace the opportunity to learn from them and build a better Bar." President-elect Bruce Neckers observed the beginning of a profound change in how the Bar goes about listening to and serving its members.

Here are the three themes that emerged most strongly from the conference. In a strong chorus and with remarkable consistency, local bar leaders told us:

- Help us adjust to a changing practice. Help us with technology and law office efficiency issues. Help us with the adjustments needed in a changing economy statewide, nationally, and internationally.

- Make sections, local bars, and members a more important part of planning and executing the State Bar's agenda.
- Be honest: give us "less P.R. and more straight talk."

Do you agree? What is important to you as a lawyer? How can the Bar help?

Dadie Perlov, a principal with Consensus Management Group who has consulted with associations throughout the country, gave

I, for one, believe in this Bar's potential. So much so that I left my home and friends to help be part of something special.

those of us at the conference some great suggestions on how bar associations can break down the classic barriers between the institution and its membership, to overcome the "we" and "they" syndrome: First, collaborate, listen, and plan

together. Second, clarify expectations. Don't try to be all things to all people. Third, communicate. Finally, set attainable and measurable goals and benchmarks.

In upcoming months we will be trying to do just those things. Please help us.

I, for one, believe in this Bar's potential. So much so that I left my home and friends to help be part of something special. Our

Share your thoughts/concerns

Please forward comments to voice@mail.michbar.org

potential will not be realized by tinkering around the edges of problems. We must hit them head on.

When I interviewed for the executive director job, I was asked my view of unified bars. I said I believe in them. At their best they provide a place for all lawyers, diverse as we are, to stand as one on the high ethical ground that gives our profession its singular purpose. If we stand together on that ground, a unified bar is by far the best way to serve lawyers and the public.

The worst thing in the world is not the loss of a unified bar, however. The worst thing is to lose sight of the common values of our profession and thus lose our valid reason to exist. The Bar cannot be all things to all lawyers, but it must be the central advocate for what it means to be a lawyer and what lawyers need to serve the public as the profession evolves.

Fulfilling that role will mean tough programmatic and financial decisions.

From what I've been hearing, few lawyers, if any, believe that our Bar has been doing everything wrong, but a great many believe that we're not doing enough right. A significant number of lawyers don't really know what the Bar does, and believe that the Bar is simply not relevant to their professional lives. Nevertheless, you can bet your bottom dollar that every change from the status quo that we consider in the coming months will meet with strong and principled opposition. In evaluating what the Bar is doing and how it is using its resources, we must ask whether each program is the best use of our limited money and resources. Does the program serve our goals? Can it be done more effectively or better by others? Our toughest calls will be whether to replace some worthy current programs with others our members say would be more useful and important. As we sail into uncharted waters, listening to those who have put their heart and soul into current programs is vital, but hearing from new voices and those with a different vision is equally important.

Though many great things have been done in recent years, we have not been all we could be. We embrace our tough challenges with an approach of looking at things in a completely new way—your way. ◆