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# “Volunteer” Leaders— We Thank You, We Need You

It has been almost five years since I was talking with the State Bar of Michigan leadership about the possibility of becoming executive director.

I thought the discussions went very well for them and for me. One slight glitch, however: I referred to leadership as “volunteer leadership.” For one of the leaders, that was not a point in my favor. “Volunteer” was not a connotation he liked to emphasize.

I actually agreed with him completely that leaders are leaders, whether paid or volunteers. My use of the term then and now remains one of great appreciation.

History reflects I got the job and I grew to appreciate very much the leader who expressed such displeasure over the use of that term. That event reminded me, however, how we all have our own preferences and perceptions and that difference is what makes us strong as a bar.

For 25 years I have watched lawyers volunteer (no mandate, no salary) their time and energy to help lead the legal profession. Most members have little idea of the lost billable hours piling up for those serving the Bar; the number is far greater than most could begin to imagine.

Cynics may argue that folks who volunteer for bar committees, section leadership, state bar leadership, or local bars do it for networking, career advancement, leverage to get future clients, or even ego gratification. I would lose credibility with you if I tried to say none of those factors are ever a considera-

tion in getting into bar service; in fact, in rare occurrences they might even dominate the decision-making.

What I will tell you, however, is that my observation over the years is that “making a difference” is the one overriding factor in those giving of their time to bar leadership.

For some, the drive to make a difference grows out of commitment to a particular program they believe to be really effective. For others, it may come simply from a general feeling that things can be better, and they want to be part of that rather than sit on the sidelines. And still others are motivated by an ever-increasing concern that the ship needs righting and they are the ones to right it. Whatever the motivation, the drive is a great resource for the State Bar and our profession.

Keep in mind the following saying: “For every action there is an equal and opposite criticism.” We as lawyers have always had and always will have differing opinions on just about everything. One goal we appear to agree on, however, is to make our profession one that serves our society and clients well, and that also gives us personal satisfaction. The more diversity we have around this common goal, the better we will be for it.

That is why the State Bar of Michigan moved away from a “presidential agenda” to an agenda driven by a strategic plan whose input comes from a broad spectrum of our membership. Presidents still lead. Presidents serve one year. One of the executive director’s responsibilities is to help maintain the continuity of a strategic plan that reflects a broad cross-section of our membership. The executive director, however, is only one person. It takes as wide a variety of members as possible to help us find the right answer to the many complex issues facing our profession.

Working at its best, the State Bar of Michigan is fueled by a continuous influx of a broad spectrum of our membership into bar leadership.

The Representative Assembly, Board of Commissioners, sections, committees, local bars, affinity bars, and judges’ groups together are the breeding grounds for generating and gathering those diverse views, listening to each other, and finding common ground. We need you to help. If you have never thought about it, please think about it. If you have thought about it and said “no way,” please reconsider. In some ways, if you answer my call my work will be a little more difficult—better, but more difficult, because the more differences of opinion there are in the mix of decision-making, the more difficult it is to satisfy all competing views and desires.

It is always easier to sit next to those we agree with and find common ground. It is always easier to view those who do not agree as those who must be “overcome.” Easier, yes, but only for the short term. If any organization or group of people does not take into account strong differences of opinion in a way respectful of those differences and truly seek common ground, then it will fail in the long term.

My call to more volunteers recognizes that diversity and strongly held differences, though at times messy and difficult, are the seeds for a stronger consensus and more deeply supported organization.

I conclude with an observation more specific in nature. I truly believe the State Bar, more than most, reflects a dedication to embracing different views, while recognizing that mandatory bars must use their resources for core functions that most lawyers can rally behind.

In just the short time I have been here, we have reflected a very diverse leadership. Our officers and presidents have been solos and from small and large firms. They have included all parts of Michigan, including the U.P. We have reflected diversity ethnically, by gender, and by philosophy.

**Share your  
thoughts/concerns**

Please forward comments to  
[voice@mail.michbar.org](mailto:voice@mail.michbar.org)



Unlike most bars, we have within the last two years had public servants as both president of the State Bar and chair of the Representative Assembly (Nancy Diehl and Dan Levy, respectively).

As Nancy Diehl's term runs down I find that she is the personification of the theme of this article. In the group of 124 lawyers honored by the State Bar this year for reaching 50 years of State Bar membership, there was only one woman. How wonderful that the president presiding over the celebration was Nancy Diehl, the third woman president of the State Bar. Times have changed. Thank goodness.

Nancy Diehl has spent a career as a prosecutor in Wayne County helping to protect our great resource for the future—our children. This year, she continued that service with the same unwavering dedication that she has displayed throughout her career, and in addition served all of us as our president with distinction, honor, and a passion to make things better at the Bar for all Michigan lawyers.

Whether you like the term “volunteer” or not, I express my thanks to all of those who give their time to the State Bar of Michigan. Time reflects both money and life. Those minutes, hours, days, and years could be spent in countless other ways. Instead they give it to us. Please join them.

Let me know how I can help or if I can answer any questions as you consider my request. Here are just some of the opportunities to serve:

- Member of the Representative Assembly
- Committees and sections
- Ad hoc committees

Pique your interest? E-mail me at [voice@mail.michbar.org](mailto:voice@mail.michbar.org) and we will get you more information. ◆