Governance Matters: Part 2

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In Part 1 of this article,¹ I argued that the NATA has a governance problem that poses a strategic and competitive disadvantage for the NATA as an organization and for the profession of athletic training. I identified two factors that contribute to this governance problem. First, the NATA maintains an organizational infrastructure aligned around a regional-national, rather than a state-national axis. Every contemporary issue of consequence facing the athletic training profession, from regulatory issues, to healthcare reform, to financial and budgetary matters, is organized along a state-national axis. As no significant policy-related issue facing the athletic training profession has a regional basis, this structure is anachronistic.

The second problem arises from the fact that NATA bylaws simultaneously give the NATA Board of Directors (BOD) both comprehensive policy setting authority and managerial oversight of the entire organization, including the national office and executive staff. This is a heavy burden for a single board to handle and is inconsistent with the responsibilities of the boards of several peer health professions organizations.

The original purpose of Part 2 of this article was to propose specific recommendations for changes to the governance structure and function of the NATA; however, in the time since Part 1 of this article was submitted for publication, the NATA announced a new initiative geared toward greater involvement of state athletic training associations in NATA governance. Let me be clear: This announcement was not a NATA response to Part 1 of the article. The planning had clearly been underway for some time. But because the initiative is so relevant to the themes of the first article, it presents a unique opportunity to evaluate the initiative against the structural and functional benchmarks I identified in Part 1. Therefore, the updated purpose of Part 2 of this article is to analyze the new NATA initiative and make what I hope are productive recommendations for constructive changes.

The State Association Advisory Committee Initiative

The NATA’s plan attempts to provide a formal mechanism for states to supply input directly to the NATA Board of Directors (BOD) on matters of interest to state organizations. This plan is the direct result of the NATA’s Component Relations Project Team, whose purpose was to pursue opportunities to strengthen the relationship between the NATA and state associations. This initiative was necessary because state athletic training associations have no formal relationship to the NATA. To date, the most visible aspect of the component relations effort has been the state leadership forum (SLF), whose most visible function is a meeting held in conjunction with the NATA annual meeting and a modest web presence on the NATA website, with several information resources for use by state associations.

The new initiative calls for the creation of the State Advisory Group (SAG), which is composed of a single representative from each of the state athletic training associations in NATA governance. Let me be clear: This announcement was not a NATA response to Part 1 of the article. The planning had clearly been underway for some time. But because the initiative is...
are to be elected out of each caucus and along with an additional NATA-appointed chair, will serve on the State Association Advisory Committee (SAAC). The NATA describes the nine-member SAAC as “A deliberative body that makes recommendations to the NATA Board of Directors on matters of concern to state organizations.” Their responsibilities will be to share and collect information from caucuses, mentor SAG members, and to both plan and attend (at their own expense) the annual state leadership forum.

The Start of a State-National Axis?

This initiative has relevance, at least partly, to one of the two primary concerns identified in Part 1 of this article: the absence of a state-national axis in the organization. The effort is in its early stages, and only a limited amount of information has been made available to the general membership, including its mention in the August 2011 issue of the NATA News. Already, there are those who believe this initiative to be a Trojan horse, a covert way of eventually diminishing and bypassing the existing district-based organizational structure. I can neither confirm nor deny that claim, but I have a strong opinion on the value of such a move. I will share those opinions in Part 3 of this column.

I would like, however, to make some general observations and pose some questions about the plan as it has been proposed and as it relates to the governance matters identified above and in Part 1 of this article.

Observation #1: Clarity and Simplicity

This is not a particularly easy plan to understand. Keeping straight the composition and purpose of the State Leadership Forum (SLF), the State Advisory Group (SAG), the State Association Advisory Committee (SAAC), as well as their respective responsibilities and their relationships to each other and to the NATA BOD, is confusing and runs the risk of distracting from the overall goal of enhancing the relationship between state organizations and the NATA.

For example, it is unclear to me how the SLF is functionally different than the SAG. The only apparent difference is in the frequency of communication that is expected within the SAG. Otherwise, remaining differences are largely structural, involving caucus structure and the number of representatives allowed from each state. It seems to me that the SLF and SAG could be merged, and the annual meeting that was the SLF would become the annual meeting of the SAG. It could be an open meeting, which would allow anyone with interest to attend and preserves the target audience of the SLF. This would bring some simplicity by reducing by one the number of component parts.

Observation #2: Caucuses by Size

The decision to organize the SAG into four caucuses based on the size of state associations strikes me as a decision of convenience more than strategy. The NATA has justified that decision by arguing that like-sized organizations face similar issues in their communication, budgetary and advocacy operations, for example. As a current state association president, past state governmental affairs committee chair, and close observer of state activities, this argument does not resonate with my experience. I have sought and received effective advice from states both large and small. Instead, my observation is that while it is definitely true that state associations with larger memberships tend to have larger budgets (for obvious reasons), they may or may not have operational similarities when compared to small or mid-sized states, like my own state of Arizona.

For example, Arizona’s legislative advocacy efforts have been very successful, resulting in a current scope of practice that is broader and more empowering than many of the scopes of practice found in much larger states. This success is not a function of our size (or lack thereof) or our money (or lack thereof), but of the effectiveness of our state leadership, the engagement of our members, the skills of support personnel, good timing, and some luck. My guess is that rather than a strategic organizational principle that offered tangible operational and governance benefits, “organization size” was an easy filter to apply in an attempt to whittle down the large SAG membership to a manageable SAAC subgroup. If I am right, then this decision was not based on sound organizational principles, but on convenience. It also sets up an undemocratic system of representation, the importance of which I will talk about in Part 3 of this series.

Observation #3: Scope and Authority

The stated purpose of the SAAC is to make recommendation and review proposals regarding “matters of concern to state organizations.” I interpret this language to mean that SAAC is intended to make recommendations on issues that are of concern about state organization operations and not about broader...