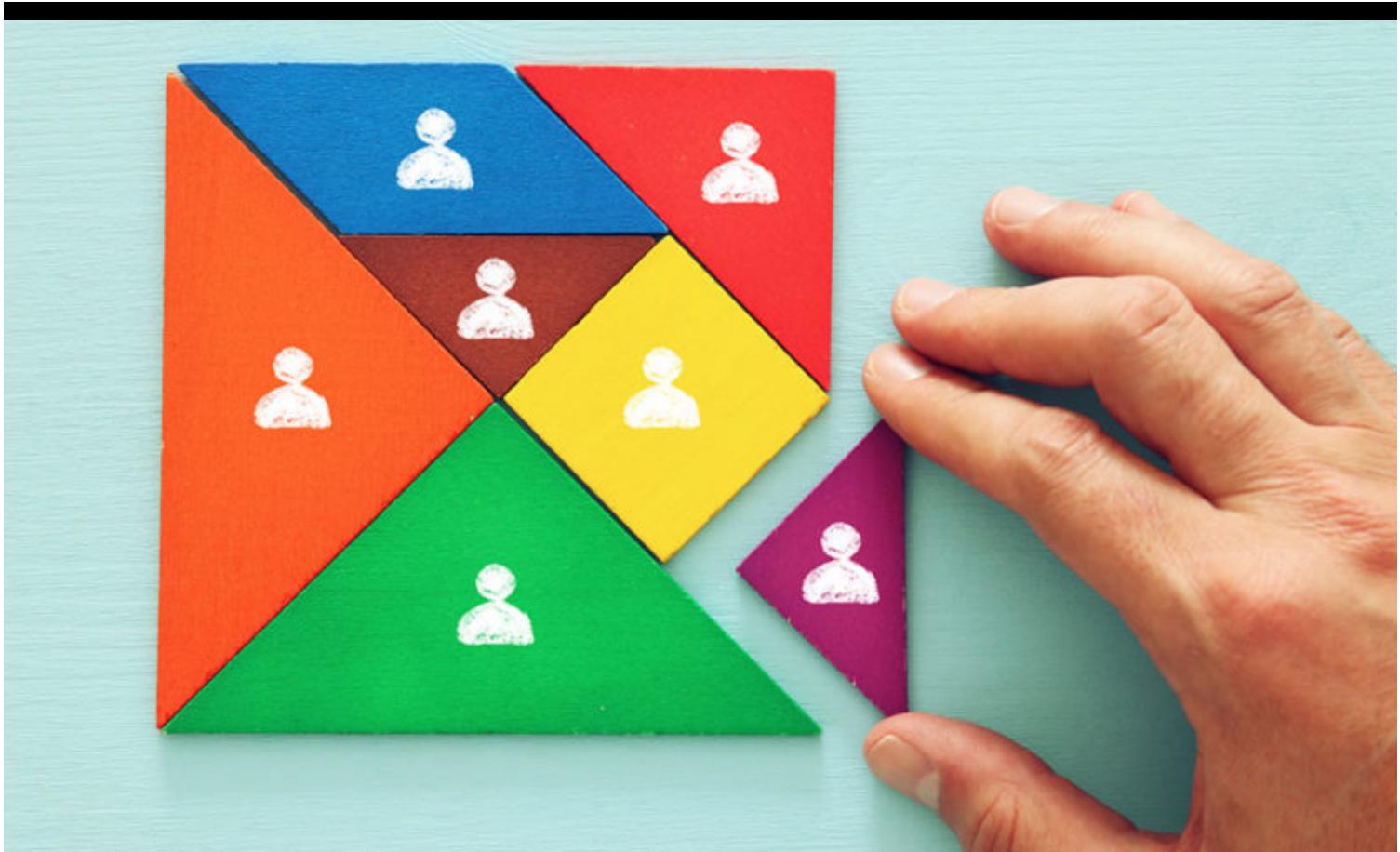


A TALE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE FOR CHAPTER RELATIONS



BY TIM EBNER / OCT 11, 2017

(tomertu/iStock/Getty Images Plus)

The National Society of Professional Engineers is in the process of restructuring membership with state and local chapters. This strategic move requires a diplomatic change in order to more closely align membership.

Component relations is one of the most complicated and challenging parts of membership.

Too often the relationship is viewed either as top-down or bottom-up. What we know is that members win only if national and local work together to define and deliver member value.

One story that's worth sharing comes from the National Society of Professional Engineers—because it's an example of a successful affiliation agreement with state organizations.

Chapter restructuring has been called a board's most difficult job [ASAE log-in required], but that's exactly what NSPE did last year with a strategic initiative that brings national in line with its 54 state societies, each with its own operating status and requirements for state licensure.

NSPE was founded in 1934, and from its beginning, was a national organization with a single, unifying membership consisting of national, state, and local components. Over time, that system of membership began to break down and fail.

While national traditionally did billing and administrative tasks, states began to assert their autonomy, which meant members paid dues twice—to national and state.

The diversity of states also meant that no two member experiences were quite the same. Larger states, like New York, offered members more options when it came to professional learning and continuing education. But smaller states, like Montana, operated at a minimum-viable level, offering only basic member services and administrative tasks.

"Engineers have long memories, and we had a real and growing trust deficit within the organization," says Mark Golden, FASAE, CAE, the executive director and corporate secretary of NSPE. "There was simply no consistent brand or value proposition for the association."

GIVING CHAPTERS A CHOICE

In July, NSPE's state societies voted and approved two new membership models, which will go into effect for member renewals on July 1, 2018. In essence, the move is a return to the association's earliest days of operations.

"A lot of the debates have been which direction the pyramid points, top-down or bottom-up," Golden says. "We had to get everyone on the same page to realize there was already a strategic purpose and mission which could help move us forward."

Golden is very much a diplomat who gives states a choice—either join an affiliated or unaffiliated membership model. If a state decides to go it alone and be unaffiliated, then members decide whether to join state or national or both, Golden says. But when state leaders go the affiliated route, they assume the minimal risk and members pay a single dues payment.

"When we started talking about sharing dues, we worked really hard to make sure most of our members and states would see an increase in revenue," Golden says. "As we sort out the details, it's on us to grow

membership."

Progress is being made. Right now, 20 state societies have agreed to the affiliated membership, while only one state has signed on to the unaffiliated model. Of those that joined the affiliated model, four states crossed the divide from being completely autonomous.

BACK-TO-BASICS APPROACH

While the decision to offer states a choice between an affiliated or unaffiliated membership model did not come easy, Golden says that change was long overdue.

"What exacerbated this situation was the transformation in membership, which of course today is value-driven and transactional," he says. "The change might not make perfect sense to everyone, but the shift was necessary for our future."

More recently, smaller state societies have been faced with declining membership numbers and even issues of insolvency. By returning to the original unifying approach—a single dues payment allocated and shared between national, state, and local—members pay a flat fee of \$299 per year.

In order to price and allocate dues payments appropriately between national, state, and local, NSPE developed an activities rubric for states opting into the integrated model. This rubric identifies the member services and benefits each state provides and creates four categories—or "divisions of work duties"—for component relations, Golden says.

"Behind the scenes, we are able to divide up the dues depending on the division of labor," he says. "If you're a strong state with a lot of infrastructure and staff, then you keep \$210 of the \$299. If you're a struggling state, national will keep more, but we also do more things, like directing state marketing, creating a website, and sending e-newsletters."

By defining the work duties and narrowing the list of options for membership moving forward, NSPE has charted a course that aims to improve the quality of its membership experience, making it a uniform experience across the country. It's a strategic move that took several years of consensus, and the work to unify is not over yet, Golden says.

"We were unambiguous about our backing and support for an integrated agreement, but we left the door open for states that didn't want to go along with that plan," he says. "We invested a lot of time communicating, listening, and compromising, and I think we'll see 100 percent integration at some point."