

NSSEA chair and committee members share advice and lessons on becoming successful and valuable leaders.

What It Takes To Lead

Nathan Spillman

Last January, to celebrate NSSEA's 90th anniversary year, Essentials unveiled its "Historic Member" column, a special feature profiling a handful of longtime members and volunteer leaders who've made significant contributions to NSSEA.

While we only had the space to profile five individuals, NSSEA would not be celebrating its 90th anniversary without effective leadership from the hundreds of volunteer leaders who have guided the association from its provenance in 1916 to today.

From second and third generation family business owners, to entrepreneurial college graduates, to teachers turned retail store owners, or WWII veterans turned company executives, NSSEA leaders have historically meshed diverse perspectives and unique leadership styles to lead the association, ensure its relevancy, and work for the collective success of its membership.

For the year's final issue of Essentials, we decided to speak with a former NSSEA president and a current NSSEA leader. We were interested in their thoughts on both business and association leadership and on the value they see in being an NSSEA leader.

Luella Connelly

For former NSSEA leader Luella Connelly, 75, a teacher turned business owner whom we profiled in the March/April issue, to lead is to learn – learn from your experiences, your employees, your colleagues. After teaching grade school for 17 years — 16 years in the primary and middle school grades and one year substitute teaching — Connelly co-founded Creative Teaching Press in Huntington Beach, California in 1965. Her company joined NSSEA in 1972 and six years later she became the first woman to sit on the association's Executive Committee. In 1994 she was named NSSEA President, a position held by men for 76 of the preceding 77 years.

Connelly developed her leadership skills first as classroom teacher, then as a business owner and NSSEA leader. At its core, effective leadership, Connelly says, boils down to the ability to motivate, because “if your team is doing their best, they’ll make you look like a leader.”

Q In what way did the leadership skills required of you for 17 years in the classroom relate to the leadership skills required of you to run Creative Teaching Press?

A Knowing how to motivate your students is the most important skill needed to be an effective teacher. Next is gaining the trust and confidence of both your students and their parents.

In order to run an effective business you need to know how to motivate your employees and also gain their trust and confidence. You also have to build the trust and confidence of your customers.

Q As a teacher you’ve led in the classroom, as a business owner, you’ve built and led a successful company, and as NSSEA Chairman of the Board, you’ve led an association.

Of these three leadership positions, which did you find most challenging and why?

A Of the three positions, leading a company was the most challenging. I had a great partner in my husband, Pat, but I had come from the classroom and he had been a civil engineer. We had no previous business experience. Producing and marketing product, managing inventory and finances were new challenges. We had some great mentors. We took extension classes and flew by the seat of our pants!

Q Looking back at these leadership positions, what are three things you’ve learned about what it takes to be an effective leader?

A Part of this question is answered in question number one. To be a leader you have to motivate the people around you. You have to let the people you’re working with — whether they’re employees or association committee members — know that you value them as people first. You also have to value their efforts and their ideas. You do this by showing appreciation in words, or in the case of employees, words and fair compensation.

Q In 1994, you became the 75th NSSEA Chairman of the Board and the first woman to hold the position. Were you aware of this at the time? If so, what did it mean to you?

A I was the first woman (manufacturer) member to be what was then called president. Cherie Garland was actually the first woman to be president of NSSEA. However, in 1978 I became the first woman to serve on the NSSEA Executive Committee. When I attended my first meeting I expected to be intimidated. I had only been a member for six years and there was a general feeling that NSSEA was a “good old boys club.” I found that the men I worked with respected me and welcomed my input. I can still remember some of these men’s names. I watched their leadership skills and learned from the experience. I especially remember Jim Campell from Mississippi. He was a master at leading a meeting, giving everyone the opportunity to speak and staying on the agenda. Later, when I was Chairman of the Board, I was complimented on the way I chaired meetings. I remembered Jim, but unfortunately I couldn’t thank him as he died very young from a heart attack.

Q What advice would you offer a young woman today who aspires to lead in a male-dominated field such as law enforcement, engineering, computer and math sciences, medicine (surgeons) law, etc.?

A There are so many opportunities for women today. When I was young women were primarily encouraged to be teachers, nurses and secretaries. The joke in my family is that I can’t type and can’t stand the sight of blood so I became a teacher. That’s not true, I wanted to be a teacher from the first day I started Kindergarten. But to answer your question, I think that to succeed in any field, you have to prove yourself whether you’re a man or a woman. I would suggest to anyone that they find a mentor. Study that person’s skills. Show respect and show that you are willing to work as hard and smart as anyone else.

Q What do you like about being a business leader and what about being a leader scares you?

A What I liked about being a leader was the opportunity to work with other successful people, whether they were men or women. What scared me in the beginning was that I had so much to learn. I shouldn’t have put that in the past tense because even

though I’m retired and doing mostly volunteer work, I am still learning. Hopefully, I’ll never stop!

Q How do you define leadership?
A Leadership is motivation. It’s knowing how to get the best efforts from those around you.

Whether it is business, volunteer work or sports, your team will make you look like a leader if they are doing their best.

Mark Carlson

For NSSEA member Mark Carlson, leadership manifests itself in the form of solutions. If you’re looking for a leader, he believes, note a solution, trace it to the original problem and along the way you’ll likely find your leader.

Carlson, 48, serves on NSSEA’s Nominating Committee, the group responsible for reviewing member-selected nominees for NSSEA leadership positions. With over 20 years experience in leadership roles, including nearly a decade of volunteer service on various NSSEA committees, he’s learned that one commonality links all leaders — each possess a proclivity for finding solutions.

Fond of the expression “be your solution,” Carlson once felt particularly confident recommending NSSEA member Angela Nelson, owner of Stages Learning and The Wise Owl, for an NSSEA leadership position because, “with people like that you recognize their abilities to be part of solutions.”

Q Knowing that the long term success of a trade association rests largely on the shoulders of its leaders, leadership characteristics do you appreciate in an NSSEA leader?

A The first characteristic that comes to mind is a willingness to be willing. In most cases NSSEA members are already ‘Leaders’ in their own organizations, so they already have something to bring to the table. After that it then becomes encouraging participation or opinions from others. I call it a ‘free and open discussion for good and bad ideas.’ Often the very best solutions come from someone who had a bad idea five minutes ago, or it can be a combination of three other ideas. Characteristics: Be willing, be a servant, encourage others to participate, and check your ego at the door! I also appreciate kindness.

WORDS ON LEADERSHIP

No one person has all the answers, but if you have an environment that encourages participation and the exchange of various opinions, often times you can take a piece of advice or information from here, over there, or even way over there, and the final solution will result from a combination of many ways of looking at particular challenge. — Mark Carlson

I think that to succeed in any field, you have to prove yourself whether you're a man or a woman. I would suggest to anyone that they find a mentor. Study that person's skills. Show respect and show that you are willing to work as hard and smart as anyone else. — Luella Connelly



Q Historically speaking, who do you see as a great leader and why?

A Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Ronald Reagan come to mind.

Lincoln: Very intelligent and able to see the big picture and the future of our country. (Eventually) Churchill: Courage under fire and able to take a stand while also leading others to do the same. An indomitable will. Reagan: He put smart people around him and was an equipper. Even if you disagreed with him, he still was endearing to you. These men were great leaders in their time, but obviously not perfect. No leader is.

Q Please finish this sentence: To make decisions in your

leadership continued on page 29
leadership continued from page 18

association's best interest, it is imperative to...

A ... listen to others. No one person has all the answers, but if you have an environment that encourages participation and the exchange of various opinions, often times you can take a piece of advice or information from here, over there, or even way over there, and the final solution will result from a combination of many ways of looking at particular challenge.

Q From both a personal and professional perspective, why would you encourage someone to become an NSSEA

leader?

A It is easy to see when something is not working, or to complain about it and even point out why it doesn't work. I have done this. Getting involved means participating in "solution thinking." I have held various leadership and non-leadership positions in each of the companies I have worked for, and I've learned that being in leadership causes you to bring your ideas to the table. I believe you have no room to complain unless you are willing to bring solutions to help change it for the better. By the way, it is a great learning experience as well.

Conclusion

The success and relevancy of a trade association depends primarily on the vision and leadership capabilities of people whose personal and financial well-being are not totally dependent on what they represent.

Here, the association's collective success positively benefits everyone, but individual returns from that success tend to be more subtle than returns earned from your personal business. Trade association leadership — typically comprised of at least a dozen volunteer leaders from separate member companies — must work for and represent the interests of hundreds of individual member-businesses within their industry. A strong and vital trade association is almost always reflected by the collective success of its mem-

bership.

Like previous generations of NSSEA leaders, the current generation faces several challenges that require effective leadership. Today, Big Box retailers pose an increasingly competitive threat for the entire industry. Health care and fuel costs are higher than ever before. Manufacturer to end user direct sales are a source of industry tension.

On a more micro level, NSSEA leaders must concern themselves with providing excellent tradeshows and business and educational services that will benefit the entire industry. Furthermore, technological advances need to be reviewed and implemented so members can remain competitive in an ever changing economy.

Effective leadership will help NSSEA meet these challenges. Since its birth 90 years ago, NSSEA leadership teams have found solutions to a multitude of industry challenges. As the association concludes its 90th anniversary year, it will need effective leadership to see it through its 100th anniversary and beyond. If you're interested in becoming an NSSEA leader, please inquire about leadership positions by visiting www.nssea.org, or contact a current leader for helpful insights on what it takes to lead NSSEA.

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