How to End the
TURF WARS
and Build Cohesive Relationships Between Units in Your Association

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**Why Does This Matter?**

If you don’t have positive inter-unit relationships, you already know why this is important—and you probably clearly understand the factors that lead to sub-optimal relationships between entities. The negative impact can be summarized in three main categories:

1. Underachievement of the association’s potential
2. Loss of opportunities
3. Demoralization of staff and volunteers

**Underachievement of the association’s potential** is characterized by:

- Duplication of effort
- Failure to take advantage of best practices
- Destructive competition for resources and between programs
- Conflicting messages to members
- Negative perception and reputation among stakeholders
- Possible higher program and staffing costs
- Generally low organizational performance.

**Lost opportunities may include:**

- Improved program quality through sharing resources and knowledge
- Cost savings through elimination of unnecessary duplication
- Ability to speak with a single compelling voice to funders and stakeholders
- More innovation through the pooling of ideas
- Ability to recruit the most talented staff and volunteers
- Building a compelling brand across jurisdictions.

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The demoralization of staff, volunteers, and members may lead to:

- Volunteer, staff, and member disenchantment leading to attraction and retention challenges
- Expenditure of time and energy on conflict and internal politics with other entities
- Burnout of key people.

As you know from your experience, these issues lead to many other problems that you really do not want to contend with in your organization. The good news is that many of the things you would do to enhance inter-unit relationships are the same things you would do to achieve other important goals of the association, such as good governance or collaborative program development.

If you need to be convinced that this is a subject of great importance, all you have to do is speak to any experienced executive director who has worked in a multi-unit environment. Mary Ann Rangam, Executive Director of The Ontario Professional Planners Association, is only one of many whose experience tells her that this topic matters greatly and for many reasons. Based on that experience, Rangam knows that the level of cohesiveness across the units of an association will have a bearing on such factors as the ability to engage newer and/or younger volunteers, to avoid costly duplication, and to reap the benefits that come from sharing successes and best practices.

One caveat: no matter how well a leader or an association deals with relationships, there will always be a few individuals who are so intransigent, for whatever reason, that there is nothing much you can do but work around them. And, as this book aims to show, it is important to try to do so since you cannot let a whole association be crippled by a few resisters.
“Working together; that’s what members want.”

Maura McLaren, Executive Director and CEO, Real Estate Institute of Canada

Drivers of Good and Bad Inter-Unit Relationships

In a special survey conducted in the spring of 2010, CSAE explored the factors that lead to both excellent and poor inter-unit relationships. One hundred and twelve responses were received, a response rate of over 12 percent, suggesting that this is a subject of interest to association leaders.

The purpose of this book is to present positive, useful ideas to develop and sustain positive inter-unit relationships. It will not dwell on the negative because most of us know that it is easier to adapt positive ideas that have worked elsewhere. That is the whole idea behind the notion of best practices and our fascination in learning about success stories. (See the Appendix for a complete list of leaders interviewed or consulted, including their roles and affiliations.) Nevertheless, a limited discussion of the underlying problems may help you analyze your circumstances and provide the basis for planning constructive action. According to the CSAE survey, eight major factors drive bad relationships:

- Organizational culture
- Inadequate communication
- Lack of role clarity between units at both the staff and governance levels

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• Inadequate financial resources to apply to building and sustaining good relationships
• Under-representation of all units in the governance structure
• Leadership competence and behaviour of board and staff leaders
• Competition between units
• Non-collaborative decision-making process

Not surprisingly, the factors that respondents cited as leading to excellent relationships are similar to those identified as lacking in bad relationships. They include:

• Communication
• Face-to-face meetings between volunteers and staff of the units
• Role clarity between entities
• Leadership competence (board and staff)
• Representative governance structure and processes
• Joint inter-unit planning processes and shared objectives
• Trusting relationships

In your association, you probably have a unique combination of these factors at work. As you know from your own experience, these factors can lead to many other problems. Depending on their severity, they are, at best, not helping you achieve the sustained productivity and innovation today's environment calls for. At worst, these problems seem to feed on themselves and set up a negative, self-perpetuating cycle that is outlined in more detail later. In brief, it goes something like this, “If I don’t think I can trust you, I will keep my distance. Because I expect the worst of you, I will tend to interpret your actions in the light of my suspicion of your motives, thereby proving that I was right to keep my distance in the first place.”
United for Good—Building Cohesion in Multi-Unit Organizations

Many associations have worked hard on this issue and achieved impressive success. There is now so much happening across the sector that an association can choose from a rich array of best practices that most suit its distinct needs. For convenience, this expanding body of knowledge has been organized into a framework for enhancing relationships between units (Figure 1). The framework is organized into seven broad areas of focus:

1. Organization structure; governance, staff
2. Leadership
3. Communication practices
4. Consultative decision making
5. Integrated planning
6. Shared services
7. Special Initiatives

The classification is somewhat arbitrary because some practices cut across more than one category. And, an association should select and adapt from several of the areas to create its own strategy. A process for tying everything together in a deliberate strategy and plan for improvement is presented in Part 2: Pulling It All Together.