One of our greatest personal and professional assets is the strength of our ties to others—friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, and mentors. From Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink* to Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, it is clear that tapping into shared experiences and knowledge, as well as making our own contributions to that “social capital,” are important in the workplace as well as society.

Those of us in the Chamber profession know this intuitively, and information is shared at conferences, online in emails and message boards, through conference calls, and more. The tools may vary, but the end result is the same. By sharing your stories of triumph, cautionary tales of adversity, discussions about the latest trends, and tales of good employees—or members—going bad, you’re helping to create a fun, informative web of social and professional relationships. And that not only benefits you—it benefits the entire chamber profession because we can learn from and apply these “lessons learned” in our own organizations.

We’ve selected a few of the hundreds of stories—spanning just about as many years of collective chamber experience—from chamber professionals all across the country, to add dimension and character to your national chamber network. You may recognize some of those quoted herein from your discussions with ACCE president Mick Fleming during his coast-to-coast member visits, or you may recognize a story a colleague submitted for ACCE’s *Behind the Chamber Music: Chamber Notes*, based loosely on VH1’s popular “Behind the Music” television shows. And, if you’re intrigued by this article, you can read more stories and contribute your own

By Tania Kohut and Cathy Lada
stories to share what you’ve learned (see the end notes for this article.)

WHAT DID I GET MYSELF INTO?

“Within the first six months of a new position in a new chamber,” says Bob Goltz, president and CEO of the Warren County (NJ) Chamber of Commerce, “you will experience every emotion, and you will, without a doubt, ask yourself, ‘why the [heck] did I take this job?’”

That’s a sentiment echoed by Tom Manskey, CCE, president of the Fort Smith (AR) Chamber of Commerce, whose very first day on the job led to death threats. This profession does challenge you—and your sense of right and wrong.

“On the first day, my CVB director rushed in with a press release announcing that the KKK would have a booth at our festival at the end of the week. They had signed up using an individual’s name, so we hadn’t realized who was really at the booth. Our attorney informed me that we could be sued if we kicked them out. In the meantime, the media received the release, and I wasn’t ready for a quote. It was as if my Board hired me and then left town. I couldn’t reach anyone,” explains Manskey.

With some advice from a past chairman, and despite the possibility of being sued, Manskey finally decided to remove the booth and made a statement to the press. “We didn’t get sued, but that night, somebody phoned me with my first death threat. I couldn’t wait for day two,” he recalls.

PASSION IS A PLUS

There are several personal qualities that are required on the part of a chamber executive to lead communities successfully. But, sometimes, it simply takes a real dose of perseverance and great heart to make a memorable impact in a community. And, much of that success emerges from simple passion.

Take, for example, Marianne Virgili, CCE, president and CEO of the Glenwood Springs (CO) Chamber Resort Association. Several years ago, she was working with a youth group that lobbied the City to build a pedestrian mall downtown. The City Council promised the students that if they could raise half the funds, the City would match the rest.

Virgili says the Chamber office was like a televised telethon in the months before the Council meeting. Students were wheeling, dealing, selling engraved bricks for the pedestrian mall, and persuading companies to donate in-kind services. However, by the time the deadline rolled around to build the project, some of the original city councilors were no longer in office, so even though the funds were available, the initiative had to come up for a final vote with the new Council. Some of the businesses did not want the location to turn into a pedestrian area because they would lose valuable parking space, and they began to lobby the Council. The new mayor was the swing vote.

“It’d been up since four a.m. and was emotionally drained at the Council meeting,” says Virgili, “but when I began to talk about the students and their dedication, my voice waivered, and I ‘let it all out.’ I just couldn’t bear to see these students disappointed. But in the end, I guess the tears worked. The mayor told me later that my passion did the trick, and that he, too, didn’t want to see young people jaded by a poor government experience.”

Looking back at the project, she continues, “This is an example of doing whatever it takes to get the job done, and of not being afraid of being passionate about the work and the people who make it happen.”

LISTEN TO YOUR GUT. SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO SAY “NO,” EVEN TO A FRIEND

Sometimes it is already difficult enough to say “no” when asked to support a project or program that somebody strongly believes in. It’s even harder to say “no” when it’s your friend who’s doing the asking.

“A hard lesson for me to learn,” says Gary Toebben, CCE, president and CEO of the Los Angeles (CA) Chamber of Commerce, “was that sometimes it’s your friends, not your enemies, who can get you into the most trouble. You need to do things for the right reason, not because it’s your friend who is asking.”

Toebben recalls an incident during his chamber career concerning a downtown redevelopment project. When presented with the plan, the Board members thought that it was a worthwhile project to support and that everyone would agree with it.

But, they failed to take the conversation out of the boardroom to consult others for their opinion. In the end, they lost the vote by a two-to-one margin.

“This situation showed us that you can’t just sit and talk to friends and think that it’s a good barometer for the general consensus,” reflects Toebben.

Toebben further explains that this also applies to governmental policy when someone, many times a member or a friend, requests that you take a particular position. “It happens on an almost daily basis, and you have to be careful. If you don’t handle it well, you can turn that person off completely and possibly lose a future supporter.”

So, how do you handle this type of a sticky situation? Toebben says that you have to separate decisions from friendships. “I’ve always found that it is best not to immediately respond in the affirmative. Get a pulse from other members. It’s always helpful to ask
for opinions from other people. Then, for instance, if you can't support the position, be sure to explain the rationale for the decision. This way, it takes it away from becoming a friendship issue.”

FINANCES: KEEPING IT REAL

Preventing fraud and showing fiscal restraint were two common themes recounted by chamber executives across the coun-

try. Barry Johnson, president and CEO of the Greater Miami (FL) Chamber of Commerce, relates a story about how his 100-year-old Chamber was hit by fraud after some staff members took advantage of an environment lacking controls and oversight.

“Several years ago, we faced a shortage of membership dollars,” begins Johnson. “Because it was right after 9-11, we thought that we were in a situation similar to what we had experienced following Hurricane Andrew, when businesses withdrew community investments to focus on other priorities. But, after closer review, we realized that there had been fraud, and we went directly to the local authorities and the state attorney’s office.”

The full investigation revealed that two staff members embezzled more than one million dollars from the Chamber. After the resulting complete change in management structure, the Chamber implemented policies and procedures and added new technologies that would make the organization less vulnerable to this type of crime.

“My predecessor was a change agent, a real taskmaster. He and a new CFO implemented a rigid set of policies and controls. Volunteer leadership pitched in and created a finance committee of bankers and CPAs that met monthly to oversee the chamber’s financial performance. Today, with a far more professional approach and a stronger leadership team, many of whom come from corporate America, we operate more like a small corporation,” says Johnson, who has led the Chamber since January 2006.

Johnson adds that during the last two years the Chamber has sought restitution. “Our Chamber is largely funded by membership investment, so we were committed to recovering our members’ money. I am pleased to say we have recouped approximately 75 percent of it.”

The Greater Miami chamber’s example is a good lesson for all chambers to be diligent in creating and then complying with financial controls, continually monitoring policies, and enacting safeguards. Today, with 5,500 committed members, a top-notch management team and a dedicated staff, the Greater Miami Chamber proves that after a disastrous situation, a chamber can rebound strongly.

CAN YOU HANDLE THE TRUTH?

During his coast-to-coast travels to member chambers, ACCE president Mick Fleming has seen and heard his share of stories about chamber executives who ignored their gut feelings when it came to fully delving into an organization’s financial standing—particularly one losing money. As Fleming explains, “the cause could be anything from not accepting the realities of membership retention numbers to ignoring the difference between dedicated and discretionary funds.” Denying the reality behind the financial statement most typically leads to ugly CEO successions, but the most extreme examples result in fraud or criminal misappropriation of funds.

Ed McMillan, a Certified Public Accountant extremely familiar with the Chamber industry, strongly recommends that

“Write—and then follow—chamber financial policies and controls. Use independent CPAs to conduct regular financial audits.”

—Ed McMillan, CPA
in terms of finances and financial controls, the organization conduct what is known as a changeover audit (as opposed to a financial audit). McMillan says that the changeover audit is “…a special engagement that addresses financial and legal issues relating to a change at a key executive level, usually the chief executive officer or the chief financial officer. It is important because everyone involved in the process, including the executives and the Board of Directors, will be made aware of any existing or potential issues that could affect the chamber or the individuals.”

YES, THIS PROFESSION WILL KEEP YOU UP AT NIGHT... BUT IT’S WORTH IT

The stories posted to our online Chamber Notes show two things: you don’t sleep much—and the things keeping you up are pretty diverse. Minds race with thoughts about personnel issues, how you’ll hit your membership goals, identifying revenue generation opportunities, planning events, and even thinking about who should be fired!

So, as you’re lying wide awake in the middle of the night, be comforted in the fact that there is a chamber professional in every town from coast to coast who is awake with you, probably thinking about the very same things. But after that sleepless night, when that community program is declared a success or the bill you lobbied for has been passed, these are the types of things that keep you motivated and in the business. As more than one leader quoted in this article said, “We get to work with the best people in the community. We have an opportunity like no one else to leave a legacy.”

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In August of this year, ACCE launched a tool for members to share their stories. Dubbed Behind the Chamber Music: Chamber Notes, following in the footsteps of VH1’s popular “Behind the Music” television show, ACCE invited members to submit their stories. Here are summaries of a few of the more unusual stories submitted to ACCE:

- “A woman called my office to ask if she needed a special permit to have a pet monkey in her home.”
  —Sandy Latchem, Perrysburg (OH) Area Chamber of Commerce

- “We had a Business After Hours scheduled at a nudist camp! Luckily, we had to revoke their membership before the event for an unrelated incident—showing their scrapbooks of “good times” at our Business Expo.”
  —Anonymous

- “Talk about your full-service chamber... we hosted a wedding in our conference room for one of our employees.”
  —Mike Malone, CCE, McLean County (IL) Chamber of Commerce

- “Someone call[ed] and ask[ed] what type of peach was growing on their tree.”
  —Teri Wommack, Walton County (GA) Chamber of Commerce

- “The honoree of a community leadership award had a heart attack and died within 15 minutes of winning the award. His son, a third generation undertaker, said later that his father’s death was appropriate because he died amongst all his friends and family who loved him.”
  —Rebecca Marker-Smith, Logan County (OH) Area Chamber of Commerce

- “The best parts about working at a Chamber are all the fun things you or your boss get to participate in! I remember, in my first year at the Chamber, my boss was recruited to ride a mechanical bull in his PJ’s for charity! Yee Haw!”
  —Christine Gochenour, Council Bluffs (IA) Area Chamber of Commerce

Share your own stories and read more stories that were deleted from the print version of this article at www.acce.org/stories.