Thoughts on being president

In the end, you get more out of the experience than you put in.

A YEAR AGO I told you the beginning of my STLE story, how I originally volunteered to help the Houston Section. That simple act began the journey that has led to today, the conclusion of my year as your president.

I confess that I joined the STLE board because of ego. My ego told me that I helped the Houston Section so much that the benefit I could give nationally would be immeasurable. Well, not so much. My experience as a lubricant additive salesman was beneficial at the section level, but at the national level you are talking about the equivalent of running a company. Thank goodness for the smart guys on staff who know how to do that.

STLE has a budget of about $2.8 million. The board’s role is to figure out how to spend that money. We have a wonderful staff and a lot of great volunteers. How do you allocate resources to deliver the most benefit to our members? How do you spend that money to make people want to participate? My point here is that volunteering exposed me to things outside my job, outside my social life and outside my skill set.

My favorite project has been the strategic planning group led by Vice President Maureen Hunter. This plan called for the board to first determine STLE’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. With this information, we created a statement to describe why someone would want to be a member.

It’s a much more holistic approach to running the organization. Formerly STLE would do something right, but it wasn’t necessarily the right thing to be doing. The strategic plan gives us focus. Now it is clearly visible why STLE is addressing particular activities and the benefits they’ll provide. The next and perhaps most difficult of the strategic plan is prioritizing. We have 10 full-time staff members, and they are already working on existing projects. If you add something to the workload, you have to take something out.

Without volunteering, I’d have never been exposed to this strategic planning process. It was a good experience, and I’m richer because of it.

The job of being STLE president involves more than helping to govern the society. I, other volunteers and select staff represented the society around the world, continually advocating for the critically important role of tribology in solving global initiatives. We traveled to the World Tribology Conference in Torino, Italy, and the 50th annual congress of the Union of the European Lubricants Industry in Brussels. Recently we returned from China where we met with representatives from Sinopec, PetroChina, Shell and ExxonMobil to discuss how STLE can extend its member benefits to Asia. Equally rewarding was meeting and getting to know hundreds of STLE members at the many local sections I visited.

As an additive salesman, I saw one sliver of the lubricant industry, how our products interact at the end-user level. As STLE president, I gained a 35,000-foot perspective that I never would have been exposed to otherwise.

As I leave office, I want to thank a few people. I’ve got to start with the always-positive and professional headquarters staff led by Ed Salek. I have to thank my colleagues at Vanderbilt Chemicals for their support and for doing some of my work the past year. Finally, I must thank my wonderful and always-patient wife, Betty, for her support.

If I could leave you with one thought, it’s that STLE presidents aren’t a special segment of our society. They’re rank-and-file members who started on a path through a simple act of volunteering. People like you.

Thank you for the privilege of letting me serve as your president.

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