



# PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

## *AFSA Board Launches Strategic Planning Effort*

BY SUSAN R. JOHNSON

The 2011-2013 AFSA Governing Board held a day-long strategic planning retreat at AFSA HQ on Sept. 17. The purpose was to strengthen AFSA's institutional framework and procedures to better carry out its mission of promoting excellence in diplomacy and be an effective voice for the Foreign Service.



The board enlisted a professional strategic planning professional, Carol Rylander of Rylander Associates, who has extensive experience in helping non-profit boards with all elements of effective planning and capacity building. AFSA staff members also participated and will play a key role in developing specific action plans to achieve the goals.

The immediate goal of the day's work was to develop a practical vision for five priority strategic areas: strengthening governance; enhancing image, outreach and communications; strengthening professionalism and effectiveness (for AFSA and for the Foreign Service); expanding core advocacy; and growing membership and development.

Our task was, first, to identify what we want to see in place in three to five years for each priority, potential barriers to achieving the envisioned outcomes and, finally, practical strategies to address potential obstacles and realize each vision. Second, we aimed to collectively review board roles and responsibilities, and launch board team building in a purposeful way for stronger

board performance.

My report on the proceedings begins with the role and responsibilities of board members, and the strategic priority of strengthening governance.

Clear articulation of the role and responsibilities of board members, individually and collectively, will give AFSA members a better idea of what is involved in serving on the board and make it more effective. It should also improve board-staff collaboration.

In addition to the mission statement articulated by the previous AFSA board and that board's McKinsey Self-Assessment Responses, participants discussed the Ten Basic Roles and Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards and the Three Hats of Board Members. These materials — developed by BoardSource, a source of cutting-edge thinking and resources related to nonprofit boards — are all posted on the AFSA Web site in the Governing Board section.

Among the basic responsibilities of boards, perhaps the most important for AFSA are defining mission and purpose, ensuring effective planning, monitoring and strengthening programs and services, ensuring adequate financial resources and enhancing the association's public standing. Our goal is to improve performance in all these areas and to make AFSA membership something to be proud of, just as we are proud of who we are and what we do as the United

States Foreign Service.

Planning teams composed of board members and key staff addressed each priority strategic area. The Strengthening Governance team's shared vision or description of what it hoped to see in place in three to five years was: "a well-structured and defined governance system including board and committees; a diverse, representative and influential governing board; a communicative and collaborative board and staff; and increased member physical and virtual engagement in AFSA activities.

The potential barriers to realizing this vision include: lack of written guidance, lack of staff professional support to the board, insufficient board professional development, outdated bylaws and election procedures, unclear roles and responsibilities (board and staff), and resource and technology constraints.

Some of the practical strategies to overcome these barriers are: upgrade AFSA's database for better knowledge management; assure sufficient trained staff to support the board; revise bylaws and get approval of members; conduct a midyear review of priorities; develop a board training program; define board and staff roles and responsibilities, and get board approval; acquire video conferencing capacity and electronic survey and voting processes; and get board commitment to recruit candidates for election to the next board.

To be continued in next month's column. ■