



THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

PAPER PRESENTED BY FELLOW
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NECA Chapter Executive
from a Contractor's Perspective

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Like many others, when I first joined NECA as a contractor member, I did not fully understand the true value of the organization. I paid my membership dues for one reason: to have a say in labor negotiations so that the fate of my agreement with the IBEW would not be held in the hands of others. I didn't even attend my first NECA meeting until the chapter manager twisted my arm into giving a presentation on an innovative approach to the prefabrication of cable assemblies that my company was using at the time.

Admittedly, I was cautious about sharing that kind of proprietary information with people who were my competitors. After all, we have been trained in business to hold what could be competitive advantages close to our vests.

That same evening, though, a fellow contractor at my dinner table shared some information about workers' compensation insurance. The next day, I called my broker, asked about what I had learned, and in that one phone call saved over \$40,000 on my policy.

Not only was the return on my investment of time in attending the meeting great, but it was also when I first began to understand the benefits of being a NECA member. With that one experience, I saw the way freely helping others in our industry could ultimately benefit everyone, a concept that would make John Nash proud. From that point forward, I was deeply involved with the NECA Chapter in Los Angeles for over two decades.

Once I became involved, I quickly gained an appreciation for what NECA chapter executives did to facilitate meetings, develop programs and provide resources for members. I also appreciated the level of dedication I saw from NECA employees at all levels, people who were passionate about helping not just each individual contractor member but also the industry as a whole. While I always did

my best to make my business a healthy place to work, its main purpose was to keep people employed and make money. The not-for-profit world proved to be very different than that of the business world.

I did not envision stepping into the role of a chapter executive, but when the opportunity presented itself, I realized that I could repay in time, effort and dedication all that NECA had done for me and my business.

In March 2003, I became the executive director of the Northern California Chapter based in Dublin. This could have been a tough transition, but the six talented staff members already in place – seasoned, competent, dedicated people – made the transition easy, smooth and nearly seamless. This is not to say that there was not a lot to learn – in fact, there was. There was a wealth of information that needed to be recognized, learned, and understood.

I approached the position with excitement, vision and optimism, recognizing that each chapter is its own entity with its own unique character. Each chapter's personality is a function of its members and the knowledge, skills and abilities they bring to the table, as well as their individual expectations and needs. There are no rights or wrongs in the individuality of the contractor members but rather a diversity that I've come to value. For chapter executives, being sensitive to those differences, and working with the challenges and opportunities that they present, is one of many keys to success.

For example, though I inherited an excellent and well-established chapter, it is comprised of several dramatically different types of members. In Northern California, we have the Bay Area, the Central Valley and Napa (Wine Country), three very distinct areas with distinct personalities, politics and needs. As such, it is important that we as a

NECA team are open to all of our membership, gathering ideas across the regions, staying sensitive to the needs of each constituency and remaining open-minded about how we can best serve them.

This thoughtful awareness of membership is only one of the roles chapter executives across the country fill. Others roles include advocate, advisor, negotiator, travel agent, event planner and accountant. Chapter executives must help promote their members, maintain effective labor relations, uphold the bylaws of the chapter, tend to the chapter's finances, and oversee the daily operations of the office environment. We are responsible to each and every contractor member in our chapter, and to the industry as a whole.

Along those same lines, our work with the IBEW is one of the most important roles we have, and one that can present some of the biggest challenges. As a chapter, you either work with the IBEW as a partner or you do not; there is little middle ground. It is no secret that, generally speaking, our union contractors are at a disadvantage when competing against non-union contractors, especially during tough economic times. Our chapter is keenly aware that competing with union contractors offers a level playing field, in large part because non-union contractors are not required to follow the same rules. Further, we recognize that most union contractors make for even better competitors if they belong to NECA. We believe that this model has helped our chapter focus and prioritize its efforts, and to progress toward a better future for our contractors and the industry as a whole. To this end, we believe that assisting the IBEW with organizing efforts is a win-win for both entities. With this focus it is also important to work with the IBEW to make our agreements more competitive and create a more realistic and workable atmosphere for our contractors.

Truly, the amount of work chapter executives are responsible for cannot be handled by one person alone. Accomplishing a chapter's goals requires the involvement of volunteers, an active chapter membership and an effective board of directors. For larger chapters, it also involves the efforts of a dedicated staff.

In addition to the vast amount of work required for the daily upkeep of a chapter, there is also the ongoing need to maintain a productive and positive attitude. When problems arise, it is our responsibility, goal and opportunity to focus on using those challenges as catalysts for positive change. We do this by asking ourselves questions such as "How can we solve this issue?" and "How are we going to use this as an opportunity for NECA, its leaders, and its membership to not only succeed but to excel?"

As with for-profit businesses, the challenges faced by a chapter are often moving targets with solutions sometimes leading to new issues and issues sometimes taking on lives of their own. Personalities sometimes clash, the rumor mill sometimes spreads misinformation, and members sometimes benefit from being reminded of how hard their chapter is working for the health of their businesses and our industry.

Along those lines, I realized early in my time as executive director that if we could further open lines of communication between the chapter and the contractor members, we could not only stay abreast of our members' needs more fully, we could also provide them with additional resources and show them exactly how much we do to support them and their businesses.

It took time to build strong lines of communication, but now we have three regular means for reaching out to our members.

First, we enhanced our meetings, working hard to make them not only informative but also entertaining and attractive to our membership. In this way, we encourage our contractor members to take full advantage of their membership and to view one another as partners rather than competitors.

We also changed our newsletter to make it less frequent but more robust. This quarterly newsletter acts as a magazine with the latest information about NECA, our chapter and our industry.

Finally, we began a Monday Morning eBlast, one legal-sized page that is emailed weekly and includes what we're working on, industry news, and a weekly calendar of events, so that our contractors are not only reminded of upcoming meetings and events, but are aware of our ongoing activities on their behalf. This eBlast has been among our most successful outreach efforts. Because it is so brief but information-dense, it has become a mainstay of our members' week.

Among the many opportunities of being a chapter executive, one of the most exciting lies in discovering and encouraging budding leaders among contractor members. After all, while people may be born with the tools to become a great leader, those tools must be brought to light and put to use before a person's potential can be achieved.

In this role, a chapter executive must possess the skills to encourage, invite and persuade those with potential to reach toward their inherent greatness, while maintaining enough self-control to avoid being forceful, pushy or overly directive. Members, volunteers and other contributors must be allowed to take the steps themselves, but we can make it easier by providing the support and confidence they need to get started.

For chapter executives, identifying, empowering and encouraging these future leaders is a powerful way to ensure the future of our organization as a cooperative entity where contractor members understand the value of giving back and the ways that helping one another helps us all.

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In 2003, I traveled to Cancun, Mexico on an ELECTRI International Foundation trip. Having the opportunity to serve on the ELECTRI Council for many years, I had already gained a deep appreciation for the foundation and its mission. To me, it was the epitome of what an organization such as NECA is all about, and this trip further illustrated those ethics and efforts.

There I was, in a room full of people who had each donated a minimum of \$100,000 - with one couple, Darlene and Richard McBride, who had donated \$1,000,000 - to be a part of shaping the future of our industry. Not only did they contribute monetarily, they also donated their time, spending trips like these analyzing trends, reviewing project proposals, and ultimately helping guide research that will lead to better, more efficient, more sustainable processes, procedures and resources for electrical contractors.

To me, this trip was a striking demonstration of what NECA is all about: people gathered together to help an industry with little or no thought to how the work they do might be repaid to them. It wasn't about the individuals in the room, nor was it the venue; it was about the industry that supports thousands of NECA members worldwide.

Don Campbell is the executive director of the Northern California Chapter of NECA. Prior to taking this position in 2003, he owned ZETTLER Systems, Inc, an electrical contracting firm and manufacturer specializing in hospitals and communications systems. Other roles held in NECA leadership have included governor, president and nearly two decades on the board of directors of the Los Angeles Chapter.