



President's Column

Alan E. Willner



“Bottoms Up! Three Cheers for LEOS!!”

“Bottom-up participation can help create a healthy (collegial) environment, in which everyone has an opportunity to contribute their ideas. One of the problems is that it adds complexity, with numerous and potentially-conflicting perspectives to consider. However, what emerges is a (consensus on proposed action items and) a wealth of information for the stakeholders to learn from each other as well as emulate any best practices.” A.C. Woodhead, Australian Agriculturalist.

Momentum for new activities and ideas in organizations tends to be a dynamic combination of “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches. Within LEOS, “bottom-up” might refer to pro-active volunteers and “top-down” might represent the staff and governance. LEOS has prided itself on being primarily a bottom-up organization, relying on the natural energy and creativity of the volunteers within the broader LEOS-related community to flourish. This is typified by a LEOS view graph that describes our organization, in which the members are at the top of the pyramid, with the Board of Governors subservient to the will of the members.

Staff is composed of caring and talented professionals who want nothing more than to continually improve LEOS. Staff might suggest new and exciting opportunities, create new service models, prod a volunteer to submit important information, and remind members of historical practice, guidelines, and By-Laws. However, LEOS staff does not define our goals. Is this the most efficient method? Certainly not. Bottom-up and consensus-based approaches take effort and time, but they produce a stronger organization that can evolve to truly reflect its constituents. Our organization is only what “we” make it, with “we” being LEOS members, volunteers, and users of all our services within the broader community. LEOS has no life of its own.

The analogy is closer to the workings of a family, which exists by and for its individuals, rather than a corporation, with a mission to make money.

I Love My Mother AND I Love My Father

There's an old, morbid joke about a very elderly couple who come to a lawyer and tell him that they want a divorce. He asks, “After all these years, why now?” The woman leans forward and whispers, “We didn't want to hurt the children, so we waited until they died.”

Loyalty and love are infinite reservoirs. Optimally, a person loves her mother and her father, in which showing affection for one does not diminish the love for the other. There is simply no conflict since the parents only want the children to be happy. As the joke above implies in the extreme, sometimes the parents exist only for the benefit of the children.

Well, LEOS as an umbrella organization exists only for the benefit of the broader LEOS community. Moreover, most of our members owe allegiance to a web of organizations. Each society is unique, yet functions only to serve its stakeholders. Therefore, societies should and must collaborate if more value is provided to the members. In this regard, I believe that LEOS' track record is exemplary. In fact, many of our most successful activities are jointly sponsored by LEOS and other societies, such as the Optical Society of America (OSA).

LEOS and OSA in China: “My Two Hats”

LEOS has had a banner few months in terms of activity in China, a region that shows tremendous growth potential. We:

- started two new Local Chapters in Hangzhou and Shanghai
- co-sponsored a Topical Meeting on Nanophotonics
- co-sponsored the Asia Optical Exposition and Conference (AOE)

Let me be blunt: These achievements occurred because individual members inside and outside of China stepped forward to create something and asked for assistance. LEOS governance/staff can stand on the roof-top and scream “China,” and nothing will happen without our “bottom-up” culture (to all those who contributed their invaluable efforts, we are all deeply grateful). AOE is organized locally with an international cadre of Chairs. LEOS was asked if we wanted to co-sponsor the meeting. Given that we are strategically committed to China and that the program was quite good, this was an easy decision. Moreover, we co-hosted the Conference Welcome Reception, had a LEOS booth on the exhibit floor, and used AOE as a forum for launching the new Shanghai Local Chapter. (See photo.)



Representatives of our new LEOS Shanghai Local Chapter at the AOE Welcome Reception.

This is only part of the story. Since I had recently been on the OSA Board of Directors, I knew that the OSA also had strong desires for adding value in China. When this opportunity arose, it was natural to work with the OSA, and both Rich Linke (LEOS Executive Director) and Liz Rogan (OSA Executive Director) enthusiastically embraced the idea of co-sponsoring/co-hosting together.

Here's the “kicker.” Given that I was planning to be at AOE as a Keynote Speaker and to help launch the Shanghai Chapter, the OSA asked if I wouldn't mind being the OSA Representative to the meeting. At the Welcome Reception co-hosted by LEOS and OSA, I represented both societies simultaneously! I was extremely loyal to my “mother” and my “father”, without feeling any pangs of conflict. Moreover, even though I asked for advice from several of the OSA leaders, not one of them ever mentioned my being the LEOS President.

A final note on AOE is that the local participants were extremely inviting. I believe this is because I carried a simple message: LEOS and OSA want to help in any way we can, bring added value, and leverage existing activities. We do NOT want to take over and tell people how to run things. Moreover, we very much want their participation, and the path is wide open. For example, in our bottom-up environment, people can volunteer to be considered for journal manuscript review, with good reviewers becoming editors, and good editors becoming committee members, and so on.

Lessons Learned

In our many inter-twining relationships, there is no such thing as a “zero-sum game.” What's good for one is probably good for all of us. Even if LEOS might give up something, we are sowing seeds for more growth and value to our members. Think of it as a company giving out stock, such that the original owners dilute their stake in order to own a smaller percentage of a much larger entity.

How is it that LEOS and OSA work so closely together? You've got it. “Bottoms up”!!! A few enthusiastic individuals wanted to make something happen and asked for assistance from their

“parents.” “LEOS, can you co-sponsor? OSA, can you co-sponsor? Having both will add value to our proposed activity.” Conflict? None.

In our bottom-up environment, volunteers and staff are usually extremely grateful for your ideas and very keen on you championing and leading the effort.

A few key points might be:

- collaborate when it brings added value for members
- bottom-up takes effort but produces a very healthy community
- leverage existing activities around the globe
- insecurity and competition breed a gradual death. (Think about a family.)

It is our members who weave the intricate and rich web that LEOS lives in.

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