

ASAE's top award winners
weigh in on management,
mentoring, and meetings.

Like-Minded Leaders

ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES AND SUPPLIERS MUST BOTH THINK strategically when it comes to association meetings, say the winners of the 2004 Key and Academy of Leaders awards. "We are trying to transform the meetings industry and elevate the role of the meeting professional," says Colin Rorrie, Jr., CAE, president and CEO of Meeting Professionals International (MPI), Dallas, and a past ASAE chairman.

Rorrie, the recipient of the Key Award, ASAE's highest honor for association executives, believes that the industry has perfected the logistical aspect of meetings. "Now it's time to work at a higher, more strategic level and to prove that meetings are a critical component of every organization's success."

George A. Aguel, senior vice president at Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, Lake Buena Vista, Florida, agrees. Winner of the 2004 Academy of Leaders Award, the highest honor given to an ASAE associate member, Aguel points out that suppliers, as well as meeting professionals, need to elevate their thinking.

"Suppliers need to deliver more value. They have to be more strategic and less tactical," says Aguel, who was also inducted into the Convention Liaison Council's Hall of Leaders this year. "It's not a question of, here's a great ballroom or here's a wonderful exhibit hall. There are plenty of venues out there that are not that different. Suppliers need to help improve the association's business."

Both ASAE Fellows, Rorrie and Aguel received their awards in ceremonies during ASAE's Annual Meeting and Exposition in Minneapolis last month.

In separate interviews with ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT, Rorrie and Aguel shared their views on the making of leaders, crowning career achievements, and more.

Colin Rorrie, Jr., CAE

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: You recently joined MPI after 21 years at the American College of Emergency Physicians. How did you get up to speed on a new industry?

Rorrie: Listening, reading, and traveling. I've tried to talk with the staff, members, and leaders to learn their challenges, issues, and opportunities. Because we have chapters and clubs in the United States, Canada, and Europe, I've [also] spent a lot of time traveling.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: You've spent numerous years as a staff leader and as a volunteer leader. In your opinion, are leaders born, made, or just lucky?

Rorrie: I think it's a combination of things. You might be in the right place at the right time to be tapped for a role that gives you the opportunity to demonstrate your capacities. That involves luck. But a leader has the ability to communicate, has vision, can make tough decisions, and is humanistic. These characteristics are developed across time. That's not luck. That's experience.

By Margo Vanover Porter | PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN SELLERS

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: Are these the skills you look for in your staff?

Rorrie: It's interesting that you ask. I've been giving that some thought because MPI is looking to fill several positions. We're trying to recruit individuals who fit into our culture, possess strategic thinking skills, and can analyze a situation or challenge and provide solutions. We want executives whose past experience will elevate the overall skill level here at MPI and move our organization forward.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: MPI is obviously concerned with the future of the meetings profession and industry. How can association executives make their meetings more strategic in nature?

Rorrie: By focusing on how meetings can drive the organization's strategy and overall mission. It's about much more than logistics and tactics. Whether it's increasing membership, educating and motivating attendees, or strengthening a brand, meetings can have a positive and significant impact on the organization's bottom line.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: You recently received ASAE's highest honor for association executives. What advice do you have for executives who don't feel they are getting the recognition they deserve?

Rorrie: I firmly believe that if you go into a situation looking at what you can give—not what you'll get out of it—you will be recognized for your contribution. Ultimately, when recognition is needed, recognition will be given.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: So if you go into a position looking for recognition, you may not find it?

Rorrie: Correct. That's the wrong reason to do something. If you're pursuing recognition, you're pursuing the wrong path. Concentrate on what you can contribute.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: Any other advice for association executives?

Rorrie: Take advantage of opportunities to learn. I really believe in lifelong learning. I also believe in helping new leaders coming up in the profession. Figure out how you can be a mentor. I

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARTH VAUGHAN

remember in 1982, Bill Nelligan at the American College of Cardiology took me under his wing, got me involved, and introduced me to a variety of people. He was my mentor.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: If you weren't leading an association right now, what would you be doing?

Rorrie: Working in the community. My wife is a volunteer executive director of an emergency aid center here in Dallas that is supported by 45 churches. It provides a wide range of services—from food to rent assistance and medical care—to the working poor. If I didn't

have to work, I would be doing something like that to give back to the community.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: Have you ever experienced a turning point that changed your life?

Rorrie: Yes. For me, a significant turning point occurred when I married my wife. When I was in graduate school and working on my doctorate, she was my steady rock. Her presence helped me through the challenges of obtaining my doctorate, which certainly opened doors for my career. I'm a better person today because of her.

George A. Aguel

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: You've been with Disney since 1990. What contributes to your company's high staff retention?

Aguel: We have a positive organizational culture. We have strong core values and traditions, and we make our primary focus our cast members, which is Disney-speak for our employees. Our leadership philosophy is that we reach our financial results by first and foremost taking care of our cast members, who in turn take care of our guests, who in turn pay our salaries. Without a doubt, that philosophy has inspired longevity. In some organizations, that process gets inverted.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: How can associations create a culture that inspires employee loyalty and longevity?

Aguel: A positive culture always starts at the top. If you don't have continuity, loyalty, and commitment to your team and members at the top of the association, it's tough to foster it throughout the organization.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: In your time at Disney, what characteristics have you observed as necessary for association executives planning meetings?

Aguel: Association executives have to be proactive marketers and emphasize the return on investment [from their meetings] for their members. They can't take for granted that members will just come to their conventions or programs. They must be up to speed on technology and be able to deliver results that everyone can understand. They have to be able to measure and show justifiable results.

Association executives should also seek to be more creative and to deliver stronger, more relevant content. In the past, you could hold a cocktail party with some nice hors d'oeuvres, throw in a few props for a theme party, and that was enough. Everybody is demanding much more than that now; everybody is demanding more of an experience.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: How can association executives and suppliers build a relationship to effectively deliver this experience?

Aguel: On the hospitality side, [the key to a successful relationship is] when the bureaus and hotels understand and help support the association's goals, objectives, and mission. It's when the supplier enhances content and attendance by sharing creative and innovative best practices with the association. It's when the bureau and hotel can be strategic partners instead of tactical suppliers or venue providers.

These kinds of relationships are built on a person-to-person basis, by

to build long-term relationships based on trust, confidence, and getting more value.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: How do successful corporate executives compare to successful association executives?

Aguel: They have similar skills. Both must be able to build strong relationships and to communicate effectively. Both must demonstrate commitment to their organizations and a high degree of integrity.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: Before joining Disney, you oversaw the sales and marketing operations at Opryland USA for 12 years. What do you view as your most outstanding career achievement?

Aguel: I guess that would be the way I might have affected other people I've worked with. I've been fortunate because both organizations have allowed me to have a positive impact on the careers of others working with me and on the industries we've served. That's where I derive my greatest professional pride.

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—GEORGE A. AGUEL, WALT DISNEY PARKS AND RESORTS

understanding the individual and his or her organization's issues and opportunities, rather than just when their next open dates are and how many breakouts they need.

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: What should association executives avoid?

Aguel: The temptation to just go with the low-cost provider. In the spirit of trying to reach greater profitability and reduce expenses, association executives may be tempted to default in that direction. That's actually a dangerous approach [to meetings] that can spell problems later because they are putting their most important affairs at high risk. I think it's better

ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT: What would you change about association management if you could?

Aguel: The industry needs to take a good look at association governance and whether that governance allows it to operate effectively in today's climate. There's a need to move more swiftly than in the past. We need to be more entrepreneurial, creative, and innovative. We need to act and react more quickly as well. The structure and governance of some organizations make that difficult. **AM**

Margo Vanover Porter is a freelance writer and editor based in Locust Grove, Virginia. E-mail: mvporter@aol.com.