

Denny L. Ramey's NABE Luncheon Speech
Thursday, February 8, 2007
Miami, FL

Receiving the Bolton Award last August was very special for me. Being asked, as the Bolton Award recipient, to make a few remarks to my colleagues is a privilege and an honor, and I thank the NABE board, Chuck Turner and my good friend, NABE President Allan Head, for the opportunity to address you today.

I have been asked to convey to you my thoughts on what it takes to be a good bar executive. Some qualities that most people think of are: a service mentality, managerial ability, administrative skills and a good strong work ethic. These are important and we will not be successful in our jobs if we are not skilled at them.

However, professionalism, leadership skills and entrepreneurial spirit are three things that don't immediately leap to mind when one ponders the qualities of a good bar executive and I wish to discuss these with you today. Frankly, these are the traits that separate the great CEOs in any industry from the rest of the pack.

Professionalism is not just a code of conduct - in my view, it is a state of mind. Like it or not, we are "on" most of the time (even when we're out of the office) and we need to conduct ourselves accordingly. How we act and - yes, how we look - affects our credibility. Fair or not, this is a fact and we should use that knowledge to our advantage.

Professionalism embraces many things, including how we react to problems and conflicts. I learned early on that in any given situation, there is the high road and, well, all the other paths.

If you take nothing else away from my talk today, take this: It is always better to seize the high road - even though at the time doing so might not feel as good as taking one of the other roads. In the long run, you'll never be sorry you did the correct thing. This is true in your personal as well as your professional life.

During this NABE meeting there have been several programs about leadership. I think the plenary session this morning with the panel of three noted bar association executive directors was one of the best I've seen in my 27 years of coming to NABE meetings.

Permit me to discuss my thoughts about leadership. First of all, leadership and management are not synonymous. Leadership differs significantly from management in that it involves vision. But, it isn't enough to just have the vision - you must be able to communicate that vision to others, persuade them to embrace your envisioned future and to work to achieve it. In my opinion, true

leadership is a rare quality and it is one of the traits that sets apart the great CEOs in any industry from the merely good ones.

This is not to say that we should elbow-out our volunteers for the bar's primary leadership role. As bar executives, the old rule that "you don't own the association" is still valid and we should always remember it. But I think we should strive to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our volunteer leaders in creating our bar association's vision.

Sometimes, exercising leadership can be scary.

Here's a little story, a true one, about something that happened to me several years ago. We were trying to merge one of our affiliated organizations into the Ohio State Bar Association. I was convinced the merger was the correct thing to do and I was able to convince our volunteer leaders and staff of the wisdom of it.

Not everyone in OSBA-land jumped on board. The chair of our Labor and Employment Law Section (it would be them) wrote a three-page letter to our president stating his and the section's opposition to such a merger. One of the sentences in the letter said "The 1,700 members of the Ohio State Bar Association Labor and Employment Law Section will not be guinea pigs in Dr. Ramey's evil experiment."

Obviously, he wrote that letter to scare the pants off me in hopes that I would run to our president and say, "Time Out! We've upset someone and he has me in the cross-hairs!"

Did this upset me? Yes! Did I back off? No!

I came to the conclusion that if I got fired for doing something that I was certain was the best thing for the Ohio State Bar Association, then so be it. In my opinion, if I had backed off I should have been fired for not doing my duty.

Scary? Yes.

Here's another scary part for many of us. I think bar association executives need to be more entrepreneurial. In my view, bar executives need to be risk-takers, not risk-avoiders. Some of you have heard me say that all progress involves risk. One of my favorite sayings is, "You can't steal second base with one foot still on first." We need to be able to identify and capitalize on opportunities.

Entrepreneurial spirit is another quality that differentiates effective executives from mere functionaries. In many cases, the risk of doing nothing is greater than the risk of acting.

To sum it up, being an effective bar association executive involves all of the traits necessary to be an effective executive in any industry. If we pay attention to professionalism, try to develop our leadership skills and look for entrepreneurial opportunities, we will enjoy our jobs more and will deliver a better product to our members, our staffs and the public.