

## A Culture Worth Preserving



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**A**t the May 2021 California Avocado Commission Board meeting, CAC directors took another significant step toward succession planning as the organization edges ever closer to a transition in leadership. The process has been underway since 2017, when the board first developed a comprehensive succession plan, gaining steam in spring of 2020 with the engagement of consultant Jim DeLizia, a certified association executive with 30 years of trade and non-profit experience on management and leadership issues. Jim's assignment has three main components: 1) define CAC's long-term needs for staff leadership and a profile of the ideal CEO candidate; 2) set expectations for a CEO-Board partnership that will form a strong foundation for CAC's growth and success into the future; and 3) prepare the Board for a productive executive search process.

I must admit that it feels a little strange to sit and listen to the Board's deliberations about its next CEO. Jim DeLizia's facilitated discussion about the qualities desired in that person elicited many responses that were predictable: *proactive, forward looking, industry experience, crisis management and communications skills, marketing expertise, consensus builder* and so forth. But early in one of the breakout ses-

sions, I was struck by a comment from a relative newcomer to the Board, district 4 grower Rachael Laenen. Rachael emphasized the importance of inspiring staff and building cooperative, productive relationships across all functions. Rachael's observation mirrors my own belief that the organization's most important asset is its people, and that every accomplishment — whether a marketing success, breakthrough on a critical issue, or financial solvency over time — has at its root one very fundamental thing: teamwork. Ask staff how often I have reminded them that no one accomplishes anything alone and the answer would be “*ad nauseum.*”

Teamwork as a concept is, perhaps, too simple, too over-used. My preference is to think about the culture created within the organization arising from the interactions between staff, and the actions of each individual, especially the CEO. These relationships ultimately determine how productive, efficient, and successful the organization is and will become.

Korn Ferry, a global organizational consulting firm, recently conducted interviews with 105 CEOs and directors



from 311 companies representing 11 different sectors. Insights from this study are numerous. For example, 86% of the participants see business and society becoming more interconnected, where businesses are increasingly challenged to demonstrate they are good corporate citizens and critical contributors to their local communities. Society is demanding that companies, both public



## Board of Directors

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Alternate/Charley Wolk

### District 3

Member/John Lloyd-Butler  
Member/Robert Grether-**Chairman**  
Alternate/Maureen Cottingham

### District 4

Member/Rachael Laenen  
Member/Jason Cole-**Treasurer**  
Alternate/Doug O'Hara

### District 5

Member/Andrew Prechtl  
Member/Randy Douglas  
Alternate/Daryn Miller

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Member/Peter Shore  
Alternate/Connor Huser

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Daniella Malfitano

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and private, serve a social purpose, one CEO said. Korn Ferry also found that companies in the top quartile of performance are 3.6 times more likely to include diversity and inclusion among their publicly professed values. All of this requires finesse, according to Korn Ferry, the ability to lead differently than before.

The comments of two CEOs, Beth Ford of Land O'Lakes and Mindy Grossman of Weight Watchers, really hit home for me. Grossman said, *"The thing that keeps me up at night is that I've got to have the right talent to be agile and envision the future, and not to be complacent, and to take the right risks. You're not just hiring for a specific skill; you're hiring people who have the capability for whole-enterprise thinking versus just thinking within their single function."*

Small as CAC might be, this is how we have approached the business, and it works. Training across disciplines is an imperative, along with holistic thinking. Beth Ford's corporate philosophy is even more to the point. *"The top priority for me as CEO is to acknowledge that employee well-being is at the top of my agenda,"* she said in her interview. And that's where organizational culture comes into play—it has enormous bearing on how employees feel about being, and staying, at work.

In its succession plan, CAC directors acknowledge that the Commission has a well-established corporate culture that promotes cohesion and employee retention. That culture has been cultivated over many years, and has as its tenets:

- Mutual support and respect
- Diversity in all forms
- Training across disciplines and team building
- Employee empowerment and autonomy

- Openness and fairness in all communications
- Continual learning and employee development
- Security and personal well-being
- Connection to the industry
- Efficient use of resources
- Recognition of collective and individual achievement and a job well done
- Proper work-life balance
- And, naturally, California avocado consumption!

It is this culture, I believe, that provides the underlying support and foundation for all the Commission has been able to achieve, by fostering a cohesive, focused staff singularly committed to advancing the California Avocados brand.

Of course, an incoming CEO will have his or her own ideas about how to approach the business and the relative importance of corporate culture. First on that person's mind will undoubtedly be the alignment of the California avocado industry behind a well-articulated, but perhaps shifting, industry strategy. These are tumultuous times, and the path forward calls for bold new initiatives, public posturing unlike before, and a healthy dose of courage. It is my fervent hope the CAC Board will recognize the oftentimes silent role organizational culture has played in the success of the California Avocado Commission and encourage its new CEO to value and improve upon it.

CAC staff members are an amazing group of individuals who have enabled the California Avocados brand to grow, flourish and maintain a prominent place in today's increasingly competitive market. It would be a comfort upon leaving, after 27 years of service to the industry, to know the culture they have forged together has further longevity and that their good work continues. 🥑