Reducing the Cost of AANA Leadership

Terry Wicks MHS, CRNA, AANA Past President
Anthony Chipas, CRNA, PhD

Without question, stress is a part of our daily lives. It always has been and it always will be. In many instances it is a good thing. It keeps our attention focused when we need it, but when it is unrelenting, it wears on us and can be very detrimental to our emotional and physical health. For those in positions of leadership, this can be especially damaging.

Each leader must deal with responsibilities, expectations, people, relationships, and goals for performance. In addition, demands such as developing people, managing limited resources, increased travel, and managing time commitments, work hours, and the work environment compound their levels of stress. 1

This year the AANA Board of Directors at its January Meeting, and AANA members at the AANA 2011 Annual Business Meeting, took important steps to reduce the costs and disincentives to leaders desiring to serve our profession at the highest levels of leadership responsibility.

Presidential Leadership and Stress

By the time one of our members becomes AANA president he or she has served our Association’s members as a high-profile leader for at least four or more years. While being president is an honor of the highest order, most of us fail to consider the personal price that an individual pays for the honor of serving the organization in this capacity. We assume that managing the added stress of holding a national office will be just another challenging task to be tackled. This is nothing out of the ordinary for an overachiever who is accustomed to high stress, quick thinking, and physical demands, right?

In truth however, the term of service to AANA members has come at a high price, not only for the presidents but for their families and colleagues as well. While not regretting their years in the spotlight, most of our past presidents have confided over the years that they have endured emotional, physical, and financial hardships that were unexpected, and for which they were ill prepared.

Our leaders make decisions that affect not only the AANA, but also the ability for all of us to practice independently as CRNAs. When they travel, they cannot simply switch off their personal and professional lives; they bring them along. While they are serving as president they may still have obligations as a spouse, parent, and as an employee in an anesthesia practice as well. Conversations with many of our past presidents have revealed that we are poor judges of the intensity of our own stress experiences. Ultimately stress can affect a leader’s health and wellness behaviors. But what is wellness?

Recently Wellness was defined as a positive state of the mind, body and spirit reflecting a balance of effective adaptation, resilience, and coping mechanisms in personal and professional environments that enhance the quality of life. 2

The AANA Wellness Committee conducted a survey of AANA past presidents, and their spouses or significant others who served between 1990 and 2010. This study was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the Medical University of South Carolina and ran between Oct. 21 and Dec. 15, 2010. The intent of this study was to determine the amount and type of stress that is experienced while a president is in office, and in the years after leaving office.

Because the stress and travel required by the office can significantly affect the spouse or partner of the president, a similar survey was developed to assess the effect of the leadership role on the significant other. The goals of the study were to determine how the intense service years affect individuals, to seek solutions to help them better prepare and cope with the demands of the position, and finally to identify how these leaders can better be supported by our organization. All 20 past presidents (100 percent) and nine spouses or partners (45 percent) completed the survey (two have no current partners).

Time and Travel

Travel is a demanding factor for both presidents and presidents-elect, affecting both home and work life. The number of days away from home varied significantly from year to year. Presidents-elect had a bimodal pattern of distribution with most being away between 150-199 days. The presidents were away from work and home a significantly greater amount of time with 15 being away from 100-299 days. One of our past presidents stated, “I got off of the airplane and did not know where I was supposed to go. It was the third city I had traveled to that weekend to speak at their state meeting.” Travel with their partners varied but usually was less than 10 days during the combined terms of president-elect and president.

Not surprisingly the days away from home and work caused significant relationship strains. The greatest burdens were on families, and on the elected leaders’ CRNA and physician colleagues. Spouses identified equal strains on family and colleagues but saw a greater strain between their partners and the anesthesiologists with whom many of them worked. During their year as president, these leaders felt that the AANA continued to meet their emotional needs, but they felt that both their financial and physical needs were undervalued. Our leaders frequently talked about having to pay others to cover their clinical obligations while they were away. One stated that “Traveling three weekends a month away from family and my work; I had to pay CRNAs to work or take call for me and it cost me about $20,000.” Another said that the greatest stresses came from “juggling work, home, and travel. Trying to keep everyone, especially disgruntled AANA members happy.”

Most past presidents recall their terms as president-elect and
president as rewarding despite the demands on their time. About the rewards, one of them stated: “Members and AANA staff telling me I had implemented or initiated things that helped them, motivated them or improved their jobs, attitudes, or professional growth. Watching the AANA evolve and grow due to changes we put in place during my time on the Board and as president, especially. Watching students and state members getting more involved and running for office and becoming dedicated leaders in AANA.”

Many AANA presidents have reported an emotional downturn after leaving office. The void left after leaving office is significant, leading to anger, frustration, and feelings of abandonment. The rewards of personal contact and positive interaction with members are tempered with the negative commentary from fellow former presidents, physician colleagues, and from angry members with unrealistic demands and expectations. These negative factors exist both during and after their presidential years.

Although everyone reacts differently to stress, those seeking elected office should receive advice and support before, during, and after their term in office in order to better serve the Association, while safeguarding their own physical and emotional health. The often unspoken cost of service, formerly shared only in small, discrete circles, is a real and expensive payment that manifests itself in ways that may adversely affect the wellness of the individual and their family for many years.

Toward Improved Leadership Support and Rewards
In the fall of 2010, AANA President Paul Santoro, CRNA, MS, appointed a task force to identify strategies to better prepare officers of the Association to serve as president, reduce the stress of serving in that capacity, and to ameliorate the stress of transitioning out of the leadership role. The task force drafted a number of recommendations that were forwarded to the Board of Directors. These recommendations included but were not limited to: executive and team building, coaching for presidents and presidents elect, enhanced communication with past presidents on AANA affairs, support for some travel expenses for the spouses of presidents and presidents-elect, and identifying past presidents willing to serve as mentors to presidents and presidents-elect before, and during, their terms in office. (See Table below)

In addition, the task force drafted an AANA Bylaws change proposal that would set regional director and officers stipends at a percentage of the median CRNA salary. This Bylaws change proposal, passed by the AANA members at the 2011 AANA Annual Business Meeting, eliminates the need to periodically amend the Bylaws to increase Board stipends. The task force is hopeful that with the implementation of the presidential wellness task force recommendations and passage of the Bylaws change proposal, that much of the preventable stress bearing on those serving as AANA president will be reduced or eliminated and ultimately improve the health and wellness of past AANA leaders.

In conclusion, the initiatives, enacted to recognize and reward leadership contributions to the AANA, may help broaden the field of candidates who will be able to consider running for positions on the AANA Board of Directors, AANA Executive Committee, and for AANA president-elect. With better recognition of increased stress as a significant cost to active leadership and with appropriate preparation, support, remuneration, and recognition systems in place, more qualified candidates may be willing and able to have their names added to the ballot of candidates seeking election to national AANA offices.

References
2. AANA Wellness Committee 2011.

President Cluster
- Provide bimonthly executive coaching to the president for support and transition management during their term and 6 months post-presidency
- Provide a team coaching session for the president and president-elect to determine how they can best work together based on their leadership styles.
- Offer AANA staff assistance to plan travel/hotel for president and president-elect.
- Pay airline expenses for spouses/significant others of the president and president-elect to travel to two national meetings per year.

Past President Cluster
- Waive membership dues for past presidents.
- Upgrade past presidents to hotel concierge level at the Annual Meeting.
- Designate special seating at the Annual Banquet for past presidents.
- Offer AANA past presidents the option to receive Routine Board Mailings.
- Continue quarterly Town Hall Conference Calls for past presidents.
- Identify an AANA staff person as the point of contact for past presidents
- Develop a cadre of past presidents to serve, if requested, as president-elect mentors.

*Adopted Presidential Wellness Task Force Recommendations Presidential Cluster