

Suzanne Boag Statement for 20 February 2011 Association Meeting

The leadership of NSVMGA is the serious subject of our 20 February 2011 meeting, and I regret that I cannot be there to contribute to the discussion. I have written the following statement so that my voice can be heard even though I will be in California. My hope is that MGs will read this and understand why I believe that our current president's leadership style conflicts with the essential character of the NSVMGA, and why I believe he should resign and let our organization heal and move forward.

The background: Shortly after being elected NSVMGA's president, John Dickhute met with Randy Langford and Bobby Clark and, according to Randy, John proposed numerous changes to our project application process, which Bobby then agreed to. John proposed, established, and implemented these changes without any prior, or subsequent, consultation with the Board of Directors, the Advisory Board, or the membership. Thus, none of us, aside from John, Bobby, and Randy, had a clear picture of this significant change, which caused considerable confusion.

As Secretary, and a member of the Board of Directors, I began to receive emails asking me to discuss and vote on each individual project application that had been submitted to the Volunteer Coordinator. I found this process a cumbersome and confusing departure from our prior practice of sending all project applications through the County Coordinators, the Volunteer Coordinator, and then on to Bobby Clark, without any formal Board approval.

Never informed of John's revisions, I consulted with veteran MGs to confirm the process we understood to be in place. Sensing a communication issue, I took two steps: I sent John an email asking that he add the project application process to the January Board meeting agenda, and I sent an email to Bobby Clark asking for clarification on the project application process, and specifically if the VCE guidelines had recently changed. Bobby advised me that process changes were not his decision. At some point, my email was forwarded to John.

John's email reply to me is attached below, and you can decide for yourself with regard to its tone and content. I found it the most offensive and unprofessional memo I have ever received in a volunteer environment, and I refused to accept the attempted limitations on my right to interact freely with fellow MGs in performance of my volunteer duties. At the Board meeting that followed shortly thereafter, John began the proceedings with a near-verbatim reading of this note. I considered resigning – and may still do so – but would never leave without making an attempt to correct the damage that such authoritarian leadership is bound to inflict on our organization.

In my opinion and experience, John's adversarial approach and intolerance of differing opinions is incompatible with a volunteer organization, and his personal style makes it very difficult to maintain civil, two-way communication. And it certainly does not foster trust or collegiality.

Teamwork and cooperation are foundations of this successful volunteer organization, as they serve to confer the mutual respect that is earned through hard work and dedication to our passion for gardening. We aren't *paid* to participate; we are part of the NSVMGA because we *want* to be. And we are certainly not employees or subjects of the elected MG president. A personal style characterized by bullying, secretive bureaucracy, lack of candor, and blatant disrespect for colleagues is not consistent with the character of our organization, and I strongly believe that John should step down from his position.

Please consider the following three emails, and decide for yourselves.

  
Suzanne Boag

  
Date

**1-2. Email to Bobby Clark about project application procedural changes and Bobby's response:**

**From:** SUZANNEBOAG [mailto:suzanneboag@comcast.net]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, January 11, 2011 12:06 PM  
**To:** Clark, Bobby  
**Subject:** Master Gardener Project Application Approvals  
Hi Bobby,

I'm the Secretary for the NSVMGA, and I am hoping that you can clarify for me what the correct process for project application approval is. Currently, County Coordinators are submitting Project Applications, new and ongoing, to the Volunteer Coordinator, who is then submitting project applications to the Board for discussion and a vote for approval or disapproval. We did not do this last year - Project Applications were submitted by the Volunteer Coordinator directly to you. Has there been a change in the VCE guidelines?

Thanks for your help,

Suzanne Boag  
NSVMGA Secretary

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Suzanne,

My understanding is that the applications were sent from the person with the application to the county coordinator to the board to the Volunteer Coordinator (who is currently Randy) to Me. I think there was some discussion about expediting board meetings by simply foregoing that step. I like to see all applications be passed through the county coordinator and the volunteer coordinator. If the Master Gardener group wants them to go through the board then that is OK with me but it is also ok if they do not go through the board.

bc

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**3. Email from John Dickhute sent 15 January, 2 hours before the scheduled Board meeting:**

Suzanne,

Your message to Bobby Clark about the procedures for project approval was forwarded to me.

Yes. The procedures have changed and if you had given me a chance to explain them at the board meeting as outlined in the agenda, you too would understand the new procedures. Randy & I had met with Bobby and he agreed to the arrangement that we are currently implementing. After having that agreement and then you questioning that agreement without the courtesy of discussing it with me, shows Bobby that there is a lack of unity within our ranks.

Under my leadership, the way we did things in the past may no longer hold true for how we will do things now or will do them in the future. In order to run an organization effectively, there has to be one spokesperson, one focal point, one person to blame. That is usually the President of the organization. I have accepted that as a standard that has worked for me throughout my life and career. Since you were not aware of this standard, I will make that clear at the Board meeting tonight. I will speak in general terms and will not direct any of my comments to you nor to any one person in particular - I also do not believe in calling someone out publicly as a productive means of working together. But please be clear - I do not appreciate being by-passed, blind-sided or embarrassed and would appreciate it if you would extend a degree of respect to the position that I hold within the organization.

With that said, I will welcome a one-on-one meeting with you after the Board meeting if you would like to discuss this further. I believe that people can disagree, argue or make mistakes but once the issue has been discussed and resolved, however it is resolved, you move on. In this case the functions of the President and Board in leading the organization continues and the matter is left behind.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to make this a fun and productive organization and I appreciate your contributions.

Respectfully,  
John

John C. Dickhute, VCE-MG  
President,  
Northern Shenandoah Valley  
Master Gardener Association

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