Crisis, Collaboration, and Hope

Debra J. Ford

In preparation for writing this *Presidential Spotlight*, I reviewed *Spotlights* by Central States Communication Association (CSCA) Past Presidents Alberto Gonzalez (2021), Chad McBride (together with Chad Edwards, 2020), and Amy Aldridge Sanford (2019). I also reviewed Past Executive Secretary (a term used before Executive Director), L. Miller’s reflection (2007). All were excellent examples of how to create an historical record for CSCA that reflects what is simultaneously an intensely personal and an intensely organizational experience. Here I enter into CSCA’s historical record how we moved through the COVID-19 pandemic challenge so that CSCA emerged on a solid foundation.

CSCA has navigated multiple challenges over the years: legal, financial, and often both. When I began my officer rotation as second vice president, it was no different. However, in the last 3 years of my rotation, the primary challenges were born of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency (I say that because COVID-19 continues today), with all its real and potential consequences. McBride and Edwards (2020) and Gonzalez (2021) have described those challenges from the perspectives of their roles and the context of the beginning of the pandemic. My perspective is primarily from a 2-year experience as first vice president (2020–2022) and 1 year as president (2022–2023) as we navigated through the COVID-19 pandemic emergency.

I want to clearly note that none of what I will report is ever done alone. Input and support from then-President Al Gonzalez, then-Finance Committee Chair Don Ritzenhein, and the respective

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members of the Executive Committees over those years was essential to CSCA’s ability to survive as an organization through the pandemic. Above and beyond that, absolutely critical to any success that CSCA has had in effectively moving through and beyond those pandemic challenges was due to the work of Executive Director, Tiffany Wang. Tiffany and I discussed nearly every detail, brainstormed options, jointly imagined the potential outcomes of various strategies, sought input, reviewed vendors and hotel contracts, and supported each other through countless scenarios where we never had enough information. In no way, shape, or form is the fact that CSCA is not only still existing, but is moving ahead, due to my efforts alone. I humbly and deeply thank everyone who played a role in our survival.

As has been noted in the previous Spotlights, the 2019–2020 Executive Committee voted to cancel the 2020 CSCA conference as we were nationally entering pandemic lockdowns. No one was willing to take the risk that we might lose even one member to a COVID-19 infection that might occur due to holding the Chicago conference in person. Chad Edwards and Tiffany Wang shouldered the enormous work of negotiating with the Chicago conference hotel and several vendors to release us from our contracts due to a phrase we came to know well: force majeure. Basically force majeure means “an event or effect that cannot be reasonably anticipated or controlled” (Merriam-Webster.com/dictionary, 2024). While it took considerable effort to convince our hotel partner that the pandemic was such a circumstance, eventually they did agree. CSCA lost no money in the pandemic in 2020, due to Chad’s and Tiffany’s efforts. (Note: All of our hotel contracts have a force majeure clause.) We just never imagined having to implement it. Hopefully we will never face a pandemic like that again, but the whole point is that we could not foresee circumstances such as a global pandemic in the way it occurred in 2020–2021.

After the 2020 conference was canceled, the 2020–2021 Executive Committee voted to freeze the officer rotation for a year. Our goal was to enable Al Gonzalez to celebrate his presidential year as we hoped at an in-person conference. As time progressed from spring 2020 through the summer, it became increasingly clear that we likely would not be able to meet in person for the 2021 conference. That was my original planning year as first vice president. We should have been together in Cincinnati, but it was not to be that year.

Instead, Tiffany and I brainstormed our options: (1) cancel the annual conference again, (2) hold a truncated virtual conference due to the cost of hosting an online conference, or (3) hold a fully online conference. Between the two of us we developed a proposal to hold a truncated conference, anticipating that we would not likely have support for the cost of a fully online conference. When we presented that proposal to the Executive Committee (EC), we were surprised to find support to host a fully online option. So, we began planning (with the 27 interest group planners) a fully online conference, organized in a similar structure to our in-person conferences. Tiffany researched and found several vendors and presented the options to EC. EC, including our Finance Chair, supported the online vendor.

As a result, CSCA successfully hosted our only fully online conference, the first in our history. I still remember sitting at my desk from the early morning through the end of each conference day, hoping that the platform would not fail. Hoping that the internet services at the vendor, at my home, and at Tiffany’s home would not crash. Hoping that the Executive Committee had communicated as effectively as possible what our members needed to do to participate. Everyone came through with flying colors! While hosting an online conference in a noncrisis time frame is cost prohibitive due to our hotel contractual commitments, it served us well in 2021. We were Inspired! Again, I thank every CSCA member, every member of the Executive Committee, every interest group planner, and especially Executive Director
As the 2021 online conference concluded, we began thinking about what we would be able to do in 2022. We were hoping that we could host the 2022 Madison, Wisconsin, conference in person. As 2021 moved forward and the nation began re-opening, so to speak, it became clear that we would be able to meet in person. Again, we consulted with President Al Gonzalez and the 2021–2022 Executive Committee. The committee agreed that we should host the conference in person. Our goal was to Re-Connect, after so much time apart, in Madison. With many thanks to all CSCA members, the 2021–2022 Executive Committee, every interest group planner, and Tiffany, our first in-person conference following the pandemic crisis was successful. This time I thank Tiffany not only for the work she did to make that happen, I also thank her for her wonderful ability to anticipate conference needs: COVID-19 testing process, online test registration, hand sanitizer, signage, extra masks, and so on. Madison would not have been successful without her talents and effort.

CSCA has emerged successfully from its experiences with the pandemic. Next, I provide an update on an initiative established by Past President Al Gonzalez. CSCA’s demonstrated commitment to equity and inclusion is moving ahead, although there is much work left to do. Initiated by Al, CSCA’s Equity and Inclusion Committee (CSCA-EIC), has been chaired by Roberta Davilla. She and her team drafted CSCA’s Code of Conduct, which was approved by the Executive Committee in March 2023. The purpose of the Code of Conduct is to “underline a code of ethics, equity and inclusion that is sensitive to the diverse needs of the CSCA members and staff; and whose intent is to guide action and implementation in areas such as assessment, praxis, and accountability” (CSCA-EIC, 2023). This is one step in CSCA’s journey to become a more inclusive organization, but we recognize that the road is long and will require many more steps. Thank you to Roberta and the members of the EIC for their work in moving us forward.

As I reflect, I remember that the first time a member of the Nominating Committee reached out to me to run for Second Vice President, I said no. I was changing jobs and moving home to Omaha, Nebraska, after 28 years in Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas. The second time a member reached out to me from the Nominating Committee, I agreed. I thought it was a major opportunity to pay CSCA forward for serving as my professional home for so many years. I never in my wildest dreams thought it would be the best learning experience in crisis communication and management that I could have been a part of. While I worked as part of the Executive Committee when I served as member-at-large several years ago, I did not fully appreciate the level of support, insight, and commitment that EC members would demonstrate, especially during the height of the pandemic. Your Executive Committee members, as well as past presidents—and I worked with many over 5 years—are among the most committed, hardworking, creative, and insightful CSCA members I have ever worked with. One member in particular, our current Executive Director, Tiffany Wang, deserves additional recognition to what I have already noted. Neither CSCA nor I would have made it to this point without her work, support, collaboration, and friendship.

In closing, I revisit a theme I have used throughout my newsletter columns as we look to the future: hope takes effort. In that context, I present part of what is known as Bishop Oscar Romero’s prayer, Prophets of a Future Not Our Own (Untener, 1979):

. . . we cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well . . . We may never see the end results . . . We are prophets of a future not our own.
President Ahmet Atay, First Vice President and Planner Kathy Denker, Second Vice President Jeff Child, and incoming Second Vice President, Kristina Scharp, will lead us into that future. There is much hope for CSCA!

References


