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Photo by Mark Yuan, CA AOC



Kevin J. Bowling

A Conversation with Kevin J. Bowling on the 2010-2015 NACM National Agenda

By Monica T. Fiorentini

Introduction

I found the National Association for Court Management (NACM) one day while researching court technologies in the California Judicial Administration library. What I had actually found was an issue of *Court Manager*. I was

delighted to discover a professional association for the branch and decided to become a member. Shortly thereafter, I signed-up to participate on the NACM Planning Committee. I joined NACM and the committee to enhance my understanding of court business so that I could better serve the people I worked

with in the courts, broaden my overall branch knowledge, and connect with others in the business I was quickly growing to admire.

I first heard Kevin Bowling on a 2009 NACM Planning Committee conference call. It was one of my initial NACM committee calls, and

I joined **NACM** and the committee to enhance my **understanding** of court business so that I could better serve the people I worked with in the courts, broaden my **overall branch knowledge**, and connect with others in the business I was quickly **growing to admire**.

Kevin's jovial spirit, along with that of the others, helped put me at ease. The NACM Planning Committee is responsible for maintaining and updating the NACM Strategic Plan and reviewing and updating the NACM Operations Manual and Bylaws. I was so impressed with the camaraderie, knowledge, and teamwork exhibited by members of the Planning Committee, I decided to join the National Agenda Subcommittee, as well as other subcommittees. Soon I was talking with Kevin and other NACM members several times a month.

On one of our calls we were discussing how to better inform NACM members and members of the judicial branch about the NACM 2010-2015 National Agenda. When it was suggested that someone talk with now president Kevin Bowling about the National Agenda and get his take on its purpose and the six priorities, I volunteered. It was my extreme privilege and pleasure to talk with Kevin one-on-one about the National Agenda.

Kevin's day job is trial court administrator and attorney referee for the 20th Judicial Circuit Court and the Ottawa County Probate Court in Ottawa County, Michigan. He is also a member

of the National Association of State Judicial Educators, American Judicature Society, and Michigan Association of Circuit Court Administrators. Further, Kevin serves on the board of directors for Mediation Services in Holland, Michigan. And of course he moonlights as president of NACM, which means he participates on most of NACM's committee calls in addition to meetings and calls with the NACM officers and board. Kevin has to stay connected to all of NACM's goings-on to ensure the association gets to where it needs to go. One of the ways he does this is by advancing the NACM National Agenda.

When Kevin and I talked recently, he shared his thoughts about the purpose of the National Agenda, how it was developed, the interplay between the National Agenda and the NACM Strategic Plan, and more.

Monica

I know you're busy, Kevin. How do you do it all?

Kevin

I am busy, but I am busy doing things I love. I've been with the judicial branch for more than 30 years. I stay on track because I've always worked with highly

competent colleagues and employees. My team helps me to prioritize, I have a long to-do list, and I believe in what I do. The branch has been a part of my life for a ... well, a long time now, and I can't imagine it any other way. Like you, I was pleased to have found a professional court management organization in 1977 when I was in graduate school learning about judicial administration. That group (National Association for Court Administration) was one of the two organizations which merged to form NACM in 1985. As NACM was being organized, I joined in 1985 as a charter member. The association — and the National Agenda — has also kept me on track, constantly reminding me of the court's purpose and all that it takes to develop a high-performing court.

Monica

I hadn't worked with a national agenda prior to joining NACM. What exactly is a national agenda, and why does NACM have one?

Kevin

When first developed, the intent of the 2005-2010 NACM National Agenda was to provide direction for national

program priorities and improvements in the court management profession over a five-year period. It was believed by NACM's leadership that our association has a duty to help chart the course for judicial systems, trial courts, and their leadership, including judges and court managers. The National Agenda was developed to be a "touchstone" for NACM's leadership in its education, training, advocacy, and other work in support of court managers and leaders around the country and the world.

2005–2010 NACM National Agenda; Six Priorities:

- Professional Court Management Education: Two Levels
- Funding of State Court Systems and Trial Courts
- Caseload Management Improvements
- Public Perceptions of the Courts and Community Collaboration
- Judiciary, Executive, and Legislative Relationships
- Court System and Trial Court Governance

Monica

When and how was the first National Agenda developed?

Kevin

The first National Agenda, covering the period 2005 through 2010, emerged from a brainstorming session led by NACM past presidents, which began at the 2003 NACM Annual Conference. This brainstorming session included not only past presidents but also a variety of state association presidents and leaders, the NACM officers and board of directors, and several NACM members. The conversation continued at the

2004 Annual Conference in Grapevine, Texas; the 2005 Midyear Conference in Biloxi, Mississippi; and the 2005 Annual Conference in San Francisco, California. To augment the discussions of these court management leaders, an extensive literature review took place, and a position paper was prepared by Geoff Gallas and Gordon Griller, both veterans in our field. Their efforts were very helpful to us in terms of enriching our collective understanding of the issues we were addressing and the context in which we operate.

Monica

So the first National Agenda took about two years to develop. Why so long?

Kevin

I guess two years could seem like a long time. The whole process started in 2003 when a call for ideas and workshop topics was placed in the *Court Communiqué* (now known as *Court Express*) and *Court Manager*. The idea was to solicit input in terms of identifying the issues or relationships that should be part of the association's future. We gathered a long list of priorities, and they had to be repeatedly pared down to just a handful of priorities. There was a series of focus groups, seminars, ranking exercises, refinements, discussions, and word-smithing at the different conferences I mentioned before. We wanted to ensure that the process was inclusive, transparent, and meaningful for all. We also needed to verify that the priorities truly reflected the needs of all judges or justices, court administrators, court managers, and staff.

Monica

And now we have a new-ish 2010-2015 National Agenda?

Kevin

Indeed. The 2005-2010 agenda needed to be revisited to determine whether the work on the existing agenda was complete. We also had to ensure that the priorities are still and will be relevant, as well as feasible.

Monica

What was the verdict? Had the 2005-2010 priorities been wholly addressed?

Kevin

Not exactly. We decided the work of the agenda had not been completed. The agenda needed to be updated to incorporate new challenges, we also needed to tighten-up or reformulate some of the priorities. We also decided the issues and relationships identified during the 2005-2010 National Agenda development process were still important and relevant to help chart a course for judicial systems, trial courts, and court leaders.

Monica

How did you go about making the revisions to the agenda this time around?

Kevin

The 2010-2015 agenda updates also involved a thorough and inclusive process. This time there were three main activities. First, the NACM officers discussed the National Agenda before and after the 2009 conferences. Second, outreach was conducted to state associations and their presidents. And third, the NACM Planning Committee, which was led by David Slayton at the time, performed an environmental scan and shared the results with the NACM officers and board in 2009 at the annual conference. The slightly revised National Agenda was redesigned based on these three efforts.

Monica

What modifications did you end up making to the 2010-2015 agenda?

Kevin

We merged one of the past priorities (Judicial, Executive, and Legislative Relationships) into the other five and added a new priority: Preparing for and Responding to Trends.

2010–2015 National Agenda

- Emphasizing Caseload Management Improvements;
- Sustaining Excellence in Difficult Budget Times;
- Enhancing Public Perceptions of the Courts and Increasing Community Collaboration;
- Promoting Improved Court Leadership and Governance;
- Preparing For and Responding to Trends; and
- Supporting Professional Court Management Education at two levels, (1) In-service education targeting the NACM Core Competencies, and (2) University and college-level

Monica

What was the thinking behind adding the “trends” priority?

Kevin

This is an area where NACM and the judicial branch have been deficient. For example, gathering information on and studying branch-wide trends regarding interpreters, self-represented litigants, jurors, technology, and so forth would allow us as a branch to analyze data and develop solutions collectively. Data and metrics empower organizations. Trends allow an organization to get to the root of things — they allow us to be

proactive versus reactive. By monitoring and evaluating various court activities or data elements, NACM can better lead its members in visioning and strategic planning. Often times such data collection is not seen as a priority, and it falls to the wayside. We tend to do the data collection when something isn't working or goes wrong. By adding it to the National Agenda priorities, we can ensure that preparing for and responding to trends will get it closer to the front-burner instead of the back-burner.

Monica

This is a great addition, Kevin, and especially appropriate for these fiscally challenging and dynamic times. How does NACM plan on addressing Preparing for and Responding to Trends and the other National Agenda priorities?

Kevin

The National Agenda Subcommittee of the NACM Planning Committee is actively engaged in capturing information related to the National Agenda and sharing it with members in a variety of creative ways.

Generally speaking, NACM will work to address each of the priorities by providing regular educational opportunities during NACM conferences, writing and updating relevant publications such as we're doing with this interview, delivering workshops for state court management associations, and sharing the Core Competency Curriculum Guidelines.

NACM members can be ambassadors of the National Agenda in their respective jurisdictions. For example, regarding priority number one — Emphasizing Caseload Management Improvements — NACM's role is to reinforce with court leaders that caseload management is a collaborative

process. Court leaders have to consider their staffing resources, available and future technology, and operations when contemplating caseload.

As for the second priority — Sustaining Excellence in Difficult Budget Times — NACM strives to share as many resources as it can, not only through the channels I mentioned earlier, but also by posting tools and white papers on the association's website to aid courts in ensuring that they are implementing cost- and time-saving measures where they can.

When looking at priority number three — Enhancing Public Perceptions of the Courts and Increasing Community Collaboration — NACM, in partnership with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), provides information on CourTools' Performance Standards. The first measure in CourTools is to gauge court users' experience. By employing Measure 1, courts can assess how they're performing in terms of the public's view. (More information regarding CourTools can be found here: www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/CourTools/index.html.)

One way NACM addresses priority number four — Promoting Improved Court Leadership and Governance — is by encouraging our newer and younger court leaders to join the Early Careers Professionals (ECP) Subcommittee. This subcommittee was established to connect those with either 10 or fewer years of experience in a court or as a judicial branch professional, or those who are less than 40 years of age. One of the goals of ECP is to provide its members with career development resources to enhance court leadership branchwide. (More information about ECP can be found at www.nacmnet.org.)

Looking again at priority number five — Preparing for and Responding to Trends — NACM invites our members' research, comments, or ideas regarding

trends at any time. Moreover, *Court Manager* is always seeking new articles, such as an examination of a particular trend that has the potential of helping many other courts problem-solve or proactively address a situation.

And the last priority — Supporting Professional Court Management Education — has two levels. The conferences are always a great source of networking and education for level one: in-service education regarding the NACM Core Competencies. The second tier is college-level certification or a degree. I believe that you are very familiar with NCSC's Institute for Court Management (ICM) classes. I understand you just completed the Court Executive Development Program certification?

Monica

That's right! One way I have definitely benefited from the National Agenda's focus on priority six is the ICM classes. California is one of seven consortium states that offers the classes locally for a nominal fee of \$50. I've learned so much by participating in the various activities and exchanges between my classmates.

Kevin

Congratulations, Monica! The consortium is another example of how NACM can leverage partnerships to achieve the National Agenda priorities. In addition, NACM has maintained positive working relationships with several universities offering degree and/or certificate programs in judicial administration or related fields, such as University of Denver, Michigan State University, and American University.

I can provide a long list of how NACM will address each of the six priorities. Because the priorities are ingrained in court business and realistic, NACM's role is to try to make the

priorities more accessible for court leaders.

Monica

The NACM Planning Committee has another subcommittee — Strategic Planning — which is dedicated to reviewing and updating the NACM Strategic Plan. What is the relationship between the National Agenda and the Strategic Plan?

Kevin

The NACM National Agenda grows from and is in addition to the NACM Strategic Plan. When talking about the Strategic Plan we really need to first look at NACM's Core Competencies. I assume you are familiar with those?

Monica

Yes. I've taught ICM's Managing Human Resources course, and there is a slide on the Core Competencies in each class. Faculty discuss the Core Competency wheel and how each competency is inter-connected. So then, would you say the National Agenda stems from the Visioning and Strategic Planning competency?

Kevin

That's right. In the NACM Core Competency Curriculum Guidelines the competency regarding visioning and strategic planning begins with the following statement: "Effective court leaders take time to vision the future because vision impacts the bottom line." It goes on to say, "Visioning and strategic planning help courts and court leaders avoid isolation, create and maintain momentum for change, and improve day-to-day court management. The urgent often drives out the important in all organizations, courts included. Visioning and strategic planning counteract natural tendencies

toward inertia — activity rather than accomplishment — by focusing courts on: their enduring purposes and responsibilities, preferred futures built around these commitments, and strategic direction and realistic action steps."

So basically what that means is that our urgent issues, or having to put fires out, often drive out our ability to focus on our goals or plans. Planning allows us to concentrate on where we want to go by providing guidance on how to get there.

This essential element of visioning and strategic planning for courts is equally applicable to the association operations of NACM. For this reason, the NACM Operations Manual requires the board of directors to develop and update a long-term strategic plan every three years (see www.nacmnet.org). The mission, vision, and goals contained in the NACM Strategic Plan provide general long-term direction for the association.

In addition to the strategic plan, the board of directors has determined that the NACM National Agenda will assist the association in providing crucial direction for ongoing programs and publications. So, while the strategic plan offers high-level direction, the National Agenda provides more immediate focus on projects currently underway. Since the National Agenda was developed, it has been aggressively used to help define national conference educational priorities, provide specific direction for publications, and provide relevant highlights for numerous presentations offered by NACM officers and board members.

Monica

Now you touched upon the NACM Core Competencies. What else do we need to know about the relationship between the NACM Core Competencies

and the National Agenda?

Kevin

Historically, NACM's Core Competencies focus very clearly on the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of court managers at all court levels. In contrast, the National Agenda is used by NACM leadership to promote the enhancement of court management and to lead the way toward better justice and exemplary public service. Due to the fundamental aspects of judicial administration, there are many overlapping topics between the Core Competencies and the National Agenda, yet the focus of one is on the individual while the other is on the association.

Monica

Now to switch gears a bit, priority two is Sustaining Excellence in Difficult Budget Times. What are the challenges that might impact one's ability to carry out the National Agenda in these times of fiscal crisis and uncertainty?

Kevin

The challenges facing the implementation of the National Agenda priorities are similar to any other court program. In times of fiscal crisis and uncertainty, there is often a necessary focus on daily operations and immediate crisis management rather than on making time for professional reflection or long-term planning. Consequently, the NACM leadership has intentionally maintained a focus on the National Agenda priorities by keeping them in the forefront of our collective attention. These efforts are primarily manifested in the educational content of national conferences and the topics covered in a variety of NACM publications. The challenge in difficult budget times is to maintain a high level of NACM membership so that materials are widely distributed within

the court community, and to maintain national conference costs at a reasonable level so many court managers can take advantage of the timely educational offerings.

Monica

So how might a state or local court system make use of the NACM National Agenda to assist in leading the way toward improved justice?

Kevin

State or local court usage of the NACM National Agenda may be modeled after the various ways current NACM leadership employs the agenda to drive conference programming decisions, to encourage discussion of relevant court management issues at all levels of court operations, and to encourage original research and writing on the identified agenda items to provide assistance for colleagues in the field of judicial administration. Another way state and local leaders may benefit from the National Agenda is to ensure the current president of every statewide court association actively participates with the NACM State Associations Subcommittee. This group meets for quarterly conference calls and gathers for a leadership seminar during the NACM Annual Conference. Aspects of the NACM National Agenda are often discussed in these settings, including ideas for implementation.

Monica

Are there any promotional materials a court may use to share information about the 2010-2015 National Agenda?

Kevin

Why don't you answer this one?

Monica

One of my National Agenda Subcommittee assignments was to develop a first draft of the 2010-2015 National Agenda brochure. After much input from the subcommittee and the board, the brochure has been finalized and can be found on the NACM website at www.nacmnet.org.

The subcommittee is also designing a PowerPoint presentation courts can use for National Agenda discussions, which will be available on the association's website.

Kevin

I should also mention that the 2010-2015 National Agenda was adopted by resolution at the 2011 meeting of the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators. (A copy of the resolution can be found here: www.nacmnet.org/sites/default/files/Res6_NACM_National_Agenda.pdf.)

Monica

Kevin, thank you again for your time. Any final words on the National Agenda?

Kevin

I'd like to add that all NACM members are encouraged to submit their suggestions on how to promote the priorities by contacting a board member. It's because of our members' ideas that NACM thrives and can deliver what it sets out to do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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