

By Joanne L. Smikle

Honoring the Human Element

Association executives and staff get so caught up in governance issues, planning the next meeting, and program design, that they sometimes forget about the “how” and the “why” of successful association management. The *why* is the people, the members and the staff, while the *how* is with a human touch. The underlying reason for addressing the human element is to spawn and sustain association growth and to develop a culture that focuses on member and staff satisfaction—the goal is to be the employer of choice.

Leaders get so absorbed in the political functions of associations—lobbying, positioning, strategic alliances, market penetration, product enhancement—that it is easy to forget about factoring the human element into the association equation. The human element in associations is no different from the human element anywhere else. Associations serve members. Associations exist for the benefit and betterment of their members. Association leaders have a dual constituency; they also serve staff. Without a cadre of talented employees, no association can survive and flourish. A key component of effective association leadership is recognizing this dual constituency.

So, why does the human element matter? Can a business case be made for honoring the human element? Beginning with the first question, the human element matters because without it an organization loses its competitive edge and cannot hope to become the association or the employer of choice. When associations ignore the human element, their members eventually begin to complain about anything and everything. They talk about the relevance, or lack thereof, of products and services. They levy complaints about staff incompetence. And, in some cases, they rally against the

executive team and oust them.

I have had the pleasure of working with many different associations, both state trade associations and large national associations. Here is what I have noticed. The panorama of human commitment is vast. In the cases where the commitment to people is clear and easy to detect, the environment is markedly different. These organizations are more open to collaborative approaches. They work at building strong bridges with their members. They are also the organizations that reach out to other associations to form strategic partnerships and alliances. Compare this to cases where the commitment to people is questionable. Chasms exist between levels and positions in the organization. These are the associations that assume an “us vs. them” posture with members; they view member inquiries as interruptions and annoyances.

So, what does it take to be on the end of the continuum that values people and visibly demonstrates that commitment? These six strategies will help you lead your association with a human touch.

Six Strategies for Success:

#1. Demonstrate a clear, credible commitment to member service

Members matter. The simple fact is that they are the lifeblood of the association. Superior, consistent member service is a strategic issue for association leadership. Using a comprehensive approach linking service with the bottom-line business objectives is the best approach. This requires that the association regularly assess its levels of service to internal and external customers. That assessment is then followed by comprehensive interventions ranging from management development to education and training to program redesign. Improving service is an ongoing

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quest that keeps the association focused on continuous improvement.

#2. Create a collaborative work environment

Use teams and workgroups to maximize levels of participation throughout the association. Just as associations are responsible for partnering with their members through committees, task forces, and other bodies, there is also a responsibility to create viable internal partnerships. Provide adequate training and education so that each and every staff person, from the CEO to the secretary, understands how teams function, the roles and responsibilities of team members, and the basics of collaborative conflict resolution. Be sure that rewards, recognition, and sincere thanks are consistently utilized to reinforce team successes.

#3. Communicate

This appears to be the most simple of the strategies; in fact, it is the most difficult. The advent of electronic communication has seemingly diminished the ability to skillfully deliver the right message at the right time to the right person. Use face-to-face or phone-to-phone communication on the issues that matter. Do not trust e-mail to relay your enthusiasm, empathy, or even anger. While electronic communication certainly has much utility, it is not an appropriate substitute for human interaction.

The other communication tools that matter in the association are the ones that keep dialogue flowing throughout the organization. Create a culture where people, at all levels, talk to each other. This does not happen through memos; rather it happens when there is active discussion of ideas accompanied by respectful listening.

#4. Incorporate diversity into your business model

American demographics have continued to shift towards a more multicultural society. That diversity needs to be reflected in everything done by the association. From speaker selection to member recruitment to program development, association activities need to reflect an appreciation of the wonderful diversity that characterizes today's world.

But, the notion of diversity runs deeper than the inclusion of different peoples into the work of the association. It extends to incorporating new, different approaches to the work. Just because an approach has been used for years, does not mean that it is the only or even the best *modus operandi*.

#5. Model the behavior that you espouse

Consistent, congruent leadership behavior makes all of the difference in the world when it comes to creating commitment to the association, its members, and its mission. Organizations that have leaders who are perceived as role models for the core value boast better morale. Employees look to leadership for examples.

Let me provide an example. A large trade association's leadership team wanted to make the transition to a more collaborative workplace. They had, historically, been very hierarchical and bureaucratic. Someone had the idea of hosting an ice cream social to begin bringing people together. They sent out an e-mail stating that everyone was strongly encouraged to attend the social. The day of the event arrived. The senior leadership team sat by themselves at a table in a corner while the scowling caterer served up scoops of ice cream. Need I tell you that each department sat by themselves at self-segregated little tables? The same thing was tried in another asso-

ciation where the leadership team donned their aprons and served up tons of fun. They experienced very different results because they used a very different approach.

#6. Create a climate for innovation

Creating a climate for innovation means that you will begin by soliciting ideas, proceed to discussing those ideas, and then start the process of experimentation with the most viable of those ideas. Start the process of idea generation throughout the organization by actively asking for input from sources throughout the organization. Get people talking about the things that they wish they could try. And then reward people for trying new approaches, whether they succeed or fail. The failures will provide valuable information for future innovations. An innovative climate stresses the special value each person brings to the association. It also helps to create stronger linkages between people, their work, and the organization.