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Process + People = Maximum Productivity

Ready to ramp up productivity in your association? Ready to revitalize interest and enthusiasm? Ready to ignite passion in the purpose of the association? None of this is as hard as you may think. It does require a lot of personal fortitude and commitment, but it is not necessarily that hard. There are two crucial factors in the maximum productivity equation: processes and people. This article provides tools for effectively utilizing both.

The Process Factor

Beginning with the process factor, I recently attended a presentation on process-based leadership. The speaker, Shane Yount, made a clear, concise case for using a simple, direct approach to leading people.¹ His approach made so much sense that I was compelled to interview him for this article. Yount's most salient point is that leaders are responsible for building consistency and focus. This happens through the use of clear standards and processes for running the business. This applies to any business, even the association business. Think about how much more productive your operation would be if standards and processes were consistently communicated throughout the association. This means you, the leader, will have to stop assuming that your staff know what you mean and expect. You will have to check in with them regularly to test their understanding and to be sure that projects are running on track. Once you start building a higher level of accountability through processes, the next level of management will run smoothly as well. Using processes coupled with metrics enables staff to understand why their performance matters so much to the success of the association.² They will also know that standards of excellence matter.

Utilizing a process-based approach to leadership ultimately produces organizational alignment. This term alignment is bandied about quite often. For the purposes of this article, alignment is the intentional congruence between people, processes, products, systems, services, values and the association's mission. This congruence is reflected in daily practice. For example, if an association is guided by a mission that dictates research and

responsiveness, when it is functioning with operational alignment, the following outputs consistently occur:

- The commitment to member service reflects responsiveness; inquiries are handled within 24 hours;
- Requests between internal departments are acknowledged on the same business day; open dialogue (between departments) regarding the request's completion is the norm;
- Resources are allocated to support graduate-level research projects; the results are published in the association's journals.

Leadership processes should both support and reinforce this type of alignment. Because the best processes are both concrete and specific, there is no room for misinterpretation. However, the processes you select have to be flexible enough to be functional. Yount says that leaders determine the "what" and "why." Then they create the processes that support operational realization of those goals. While the framework will differ from association to association, there are five questions that test the usefulness of the process:

1. Does the process have a customer-focus?
2. Is the process flexible enough to be functional?
3. Does the process have built in communication mechanisms?
4. Are there sufficient tools for accountability?
5. Does the process support alignment of the mission, goals and daily operations of the association?

The People Factor

Processes are wonderful tools, but they don't happen in isolation. They happen through the energy, the investment, the commitment, of people. This applies to both association staff and volunteers. Capturing and channeling that energy can be a challenge for leaders, regardless of how much knowledge and experience they possess.

There are three critical strategies for engaging the human element in the association. The first is rooted in trust. While Yount says that leaders determine the "what" and "why," he goes further to say that they have to allow staff to determine the "how." In other words, you have to trust that employees will engage their full

intellectual capacity in the work of the association. Allow, in fact, encourage employees to interdependently execute the work that is required to do their jobs. This means that senior executives, managers and supervisors will encourage collaboration and creativity. All levels of management help the entire organization when they are open-minded enough to allow teams and workgroups to be inventive. Employees benefit because they get more control of their professional destiny. This enhances both their confidence and their competence.

Institutionalize inventiveness by building rewards and incentives that reinforce the value of innovative approaches to the work of the association. Trust that they will get the job done. You have to trust employees to determine how best to accomplish tasks; provide them with the guidance that they need while still allowing room for them to grow and develop. Tracking progress is essential, but this does not mean micromanaging every aspect of their work. It does mean that you will use project planning and project management tools to keep people on target.

The second strategy for engaging people is using reward, recognition and celebration.³ These two activities generate emotional energy because people get in the habit of having fun. They begin to enjoy a more supportive, more interactive environment. While reward will focus on the successes of the teams and their individual members, recognition and celebration will more often focus on the association's accomplishments. Get in the habit of celebrating small victories, the large ones don't come that often. This celebratory mentality will eventually permeate the teams and workgroups. They will undoubtedly create their own rituals for celebrating their successes. This emphasis on positive reinforcement serves to create a more positive, outcome-focused culture.

When creating celebrations, consider unusual approaches. Think about closing down for a day after the Annual Meeting and hosting a cookout for staff and their families. Think about a staff outing to a movie, the theater or dinner. Better yet, ask your people what kinds of recognition and celebrations would work best for them.

Another note on this subject, be certain that you reward individuals and teams not just for their positive outcomes, but also for their effort. Every effort will not necessarily be a winner, but there is a lot to be said for making an attempt. That attempt is a sign of commitment. Be sure and encourage more of the same by acknowledging the investment.

The third strategy for engaging the human element is to build lasting relationships. This is not to say that we are encouraging people to spend their entire careers within one association, rather create an environment that is built on healthy interpersonal relations throughout the association. Begin building relationships by having gatherings, whether formal or informal, that encourage people to communicate, share and resolve problems. As a leader, creating a sense of familiarity also enables you to forge stronger relationships. This means that you have to be accessible, approachable and caring. It also means that you will work to personalize relationships with people throughout the association. I am not suggesting that every employee be invited to your home for cocktails, rather that you get to know the staff, what they are working on and the unique value that they bring to the organization. Personalize the relationships so that they come to know you as a caring leader committed to the association and to its people.

Building and maintaining lasting relationships also requires you to create equity throughout the association. Pay should be based on performance, clear standards and merit. Without evident equity you create insecurity, little loyalty and eventually damaged relationships with members. The other consequence of poor relationships is constant turnover. As a leader you are called on to operate on a clear set of principles and values. This means that you will establish acceptable boundaries, encourage people and honor all agreements, whether with members or staff. These can be tough challenges for leaders faced with the never-ending internal and external politics indicative of the association world.

Summary

Having both a process and a people-focused orientation enables you to engage staff, members and volunteer leadership in the work association. Getting to that point calls for diligent leadership that consistently reinforces standards, accountability and dialogue. The benefit of this additional effort is the investment and commitment of staff, volunteer leadership and members. The other benefit is that your association will become an employer of choice; the place where the best and brightest want to come invest their talents.

References:

1. Shane Yount is the author of *Buried Alive: Digging Out of the Management Dumpster*.
2. Adapted from *Firing Up the Front Line*, by Jon R. Katzenbach and Jason Santamaria, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1999 pp.107-117.
3. Adapted from *Firing Up The Fron Line*, by Jon R. Katzenbach and Jason Santamaria, *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1999, pp.107-117.