



ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES MANAGEMENT SKILLS ARE THE KEY

BIG OR SMALL, ASSOCIATIONS NEED GOOD LEADERSHIP TO GROW AND SUSTAIN THEIR EXISTENCE. SO WHAT ARE THE TRAITS NEEDED TO FILL THE ROLE OF THE ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVE?

The ability to manage a diverse range of masters! A membership organisation's management is not an easy task and requires the skill of a diplomat and the strategy of a politician. A personality whom members like is a major asset but just as important is the ability to manage. However a number of association executives who may not be the most personable character may offer skills such as strong marketing, finance and lobbying skills or bring relevant and much needed experience that compensate for the lack of charismatic character.

It depends on the association and its *raison d'être*. All associations convene to benefit members but different requirements exist to serve members. These include but are not limited to lobbying to government for legislation or support; education/accreditation /

recognition of skills; standards; public relations to promote the best interest of an industry or profession; networking opportunities at seminars or conferences; matching buyers and sellers either through exhibition or publications; publishing to communicate both externally or within an industry, trade or profession or promote scientific achievement.

BRING SUCCESS

So how does the association executive bring success to their role? An association is often a cesspool of ideas therefore it takes wisdom to determine paths to bring useful ideas to fruition. Guiding members to direct their enthusiasm, energy and effort down a path to success is the key. Not too fast and not too slow in order to produce outcomes to please the majority and not the private agenda of the self-serving individual.

One of the many challenges of running an association is that each member owns the organisation and some think they can lay personal claim to harness the organisation to their own ends but alas this does not sit well with others and can generate a lot of anxiety if not steered in the right direction. Some egos need to be dealt with but it doesn't stop there, there are some aggressive go getters, some who think their idea is a top priority and those who want to be heard but not necessarily do too much, just enough to gain a good reputation. All these types present their own challenges.

Favourite association executives are those who can *manage*. Management means delegation and careful overseeing. The term *manage* is a much overrated word because the lack of this skill seems to be on the increase. It is a pleasure to work with those association executives who are skilled in their tasks that advance the association and appreciate and praise those who support them. It is not always wise to grow all services in a head office but spread the goodwill among members who can contribute and

take active involvement within the association and outsource to a range of services that bring their own expertise to enhance the development of the association.

Conflict with the Honorary President or Board is not desirable hence the ability to manage difficult personalities or those who are time poor is imperative. In today's age there is the information overload factor that is chipping away detrimentally at all associations. The ability to get the communication right, meaningful and succinct, and of the ideal frequency (but not so much that is of nuisance value), will become more of a determining factor in judging an association executive's success.

Tying together the ideas and passions of the succession of volunteers in the honorary positions on boards and committees takes vision and strategic planning. Dealing with

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the ebbs and flows of the tidal change of volunteers whilst encountering the periodic king tide and still keeping the organisation on track for growth requires a strong hand on the steering wheel and expert navigation.

GOOD LEADER

A good leader credits those who perform well but doesn't tolerate nonsense. One gets the best out of people by recognising their worthwhile contribution. More than just diplomacy, direct communication is the

secret to informing members or staff of their strengths and positive contributions or their weaknesses or failures but it must be done in a business-like manner. Just because an outspoken and demanding person is a member is not a good reason to tolerate poor outcomes or unacceptable behaviour - a strong association executive will deal with such instances and not sweep issues under the carpet. This is a vote winner because members and staff know where they stand and admire this strength to care for the good of the association and not pander to bullies.

A strong business-like stance on all matters financial adhering to the policies, rules and guidelines makes everyone understand that there are no favours and the practice is fair for everyone plus the staff are not confused, they can do their jobs efficiently. Where there is vacillation there is discontent because those who do the right thing do not like the allowances given to those who haven't. This is a common trait in association management where the association executive turns a blind eye when they should be more responsible looking after the best interests of the association. Clubs or clicks within an association should not build a territorial reputation or prevent others from giving input.

Growing the next generation is imperative and the source of growth despite the challenges and must be a priority for strategically planning the activities of the association. Increasingly rising generations are not as inclined to join associations so the association executive has to find ways to overcome the resistance.

So should the association executive be an expert in the subject matter of the association? Not necessarily. The common theme in this story is *management ability*. It's a fallacy to think an expertise in the subject matter will make the best association executive

because it is management skills inherent in the role of the association executive that is paramount for success. In many (but not all) cases the person from within the profession or trade lacks the skills of association management which in today's environment is a specialist expertise. Too often an association is held back when one of their own takes the role and the Peter Principle (meaning to be promoted to a position at which they cannot work competently) comes into play. This may seem unkind but readers will recognise examples of such appointments. Providing the skills are proven to manage effectively, a fresh approach from an outsider cross fertilising experiences and methodologies from other associations and industries if done strategically and not radically will build a stronger and healthier association.

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author Roslyn McLeod, arinex pty limited, Australia. IAPCO represents today more than 115 professional organisers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 41 countries. info@iapco.org / www.iapco.org

