

Taking the LEAD on associations

In my over 25 years (and counting) as an association executive, I have come to the conclusion that leadership is all about people, planning and passionate execution. I refer to this as the “3 Ps of Association Leadership.” This definition is further divided into four elements contained in the acronym LEAD.

“L” is for “Level with people.” Starting with your members, your board and down to your staff, nothing beats being fair, accountable and transparent—hallmarks of good governance. I remember when I took over as chief executive of my association 11 years ago, my first proposal was to have a board of directors’ “retreat” to review our organization’s vision and mission, and to draw up a strategic plan to guide us forward. The result was a resounding success; not only in terms of new and fresh statements of vision and mission for the association, but also a strategic plan that is focused and relevant to our members and other stakeholders.

Another good thing that came out of the exercise is that this initiative cascaded down to the secretariat staff that I headed. Armed with a new strategic plan, a mandate from the members and the board, and ultimately an implementing work plan, I was able to structure the staff into functional business units, so each one precisely knows his or her respective role in the organization.

Another aspect of leveling with people is constantly informing them on the goings-on in the organization, whether these are good or not-so-good news—e.g., telling the staff whether they are performing well or below par. Communicating and engaging with your staff is key. People appreciate truthfulness and honesty, especially if this comes from their leader.

“E” in LEAD refers to “Execute effectively and efficiently.” This pays importance to plans and openness to people. Equally important is executing the

plans with pinpoint efficiency and effectiveness. Here, attention to details is the norm.

Executing effectively means you are able to monitor and measure the performance of your organization, thus it is necessary to develop key performance indicators (KPIs), which may include, among others, membership recruitment and retention rates, revenue-to-asset ratio, membership services provided, visibility actions,

budget-cost rendition, etc.

Executing efficiently entails, not only that your organizational structure is adaptive to its mandate, but also flexible enough to maneuver in case of uncertain times. Also in this regard, is making sure that the organization can function well despite staff travels, absences and resignations.

“A” is for “Act decisively.” This is part of execution, but focuses more on leadership quality: the ability of the association chief executive to act prudently and decisively on issues and challenges facing the organization as it operates on a day-to-day basis. A good leader is one who makes informed decisions, hence the necessity to know the “ins and outs” of the organization’s business and field of expertise. This can only happen if the leader is, in the first place, technically competent on the subject that the association is promoting or advocating.

Decision-making is a process in which everyone in the organization is bound to contribute his or her share of ideas and beliefs. Ultimately, however, it is still the leader who is solely responsible for his or her actions.

Last, “D” stands for “Drive with passion.” Associations, they say, are like small democracies, with the members, board of directors, staff and volunteers interacting with each other, and building consensus on issues confronting them and their

organization. An election of the board is also part of this democracy, as well as the respect for the rights of all involved. For all the association's uniqueness and intricacies, an association chief executive must be able to navigate this vast and different interests with flair and wisdom and, more important, with the passion to serve.

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