

Board - Staff Relationship

Volunteer – Staff Relationship

The relationship between the governing body (hereafter called board) **and the chief staff executive** (hereafter called CSE) is a partnership, built on mutual trust, which allows the association to fulfill its mission. In many associations the responsibilities of the board and that of the CSE (and any other staff you may have) is blurry. The clearer the responsibilities of each are, the easier it is for each perform their respective jobs.

Associations are different than for profit businesses. The board decides what, but the CSE decides how. The CSE works independently from the board but is answerable to the Board. When things are going well, it's like having your own business without having your personal fortune at stake. When things are not going well, it is a very lonely job.

Typically, the board:

- Sets the association's mission and direction
- Develops policies and strategies for the association
- Make decisions that affect the programs and services offered to the association's members
- Speaks for the association
- Hires the CSE

Typically, the CSE:

- Handles the administration of the association – accounting, taxes, office management, etc.
- Carries out the directives of the board by turning the policies, programs, and services defined by the board into reality. (i.e. develops a newsletter, provides education opportunities for members, interacts with other associations, monitors the work of committees)
- Hires and manages association staff

CSE Responsibilities and Authority

Do you have a detailed job description? If you have a job description, do you understand your responsibilities? Usually they are either not detailed enough or they are so long as to be daunting. Read them over carefully and if you aren't sure what your authority is, read on.

No job description? If you were hired without a detailed job description, you need to sit down with your president and/or officers to have a frank discussion of what is expected of you. Even if you do have a job description, a meeting like this will allow you to understand exactly what your role and authority is. This discussion is beneficial to both the volunteer leaders and you as it allows both parties to mutually agree on your role. It helps establish the trust that is critical to developing the partnership needed to accomplish the association's goals.

Some of the practical things you need to know are:

- Who speaks for the association – you or the president? If you, are there exceptions?
- Who represents the association at meetings with other associations, legislators, regulators, etc?
- Are you authorized to sign checks?
- What types of controls are there on spending? Does anyone other than the Board have the authority to obligate the association?

Getting to know your Leaders

Get to know your top elected leaders (president, vice president, secretary, treasurer.)

Normally, these individuals have served on the board for some time, so they are knowledgeable about the association's culture. Don't be shy about asking questions – there are no dumb questions only dumb people who are afraid to ask! It is a good idea to check in with your president often – once a week is good, especially at first.

The best thing about association work is that your leaders usually change annually. The worst thing about association work is that your leaders usually change annually. When you have a good one, try to get them to continue to be an active player in the association.

Communication with your Board

Communicate often with your board between meetings. A weekly email is ideal to let them know of any important developments.

- No surprises! Be the first to deliver bad news. Don't let your board be caught unaware.
- Don't promise something you can't deliver.
- Never divulge privileged or sensitive information. While you may have to report something about a member to the board, be careful to keep their identity protected. (i.e. a members for the midwest, an associate member, a vendor, etc.)
- At all times, deal ethically with the board
- Your directions must come from the board as a whole, not individual members unless authorized by the board
- They should funnel all assignments through you, not go directly to your staff

The Role of Volunteers

The smaller the association (or association staff) the greater role the volunteers must play. While the culture of the association plays a big part in the specific roles of each, the work of the small association could never be completed without a staff-volunteer partnership.

Here are some tips on working with volunteers:

- Although you are asking the volunteer to do a job, association work often has a low priority for them no matter how dedicated they are.
- Make sure they understand their responsibility or goal, what resources they have, and when it is due. Remind them of the deadline several times before it is due. Use humor when reminding them. Send an email with a target, or a finger with a string around it.

- Say thanks, but better yet, send a little note to let them know you appreciate the time they devote to the association. Mention their work in your member communications.

When Your Job Seems Overwhelming

The magnitude of your responsibilities sometimes seem nearly overwhelming

- Set priorities but remain flexible. Your president or board can help you initially, but ultimately you have to decide what needs to be tackled first.
- Set realistic deadlines for accomplishing tasks and always plan on it taking at least twice as long as you plan
- Your days will often be interrupted by something that cannot wait. This then becomes your first priority
- Learn to delegate even if you delegate to volunteers.
- When you just have to get things done: shut your door, turn on the answering machine, don't open your email

Find a Mentor

The ASAE Small Association Advisory Committee is a group of CSE's who manage their own small associations. They will provide you with another small association executive who is willing to be a mentor. If you belong to your local Society of Association Executives, make time to go to the meetings and let your colleagues know you are new and could use some help. Remember, almost all association executive started out being something else before they found association work.