

# HOW THE ASSOCIATION CHIEF STAFF EXECUTIVE CAN DIFFER FROM THE CORPORATE CEO

We are often asked by search committees how an association Chief Staff Executive (CSE) differs from the CEO of a corporation. Our reply is that while there are many similarities in the responsibilities of the positions (budget, management, strategic planning, etc.), the differences lie in how associations are structured. Whereas a corporation is composed of one hierarchy, an association is composed of two; first, the membership and, second, the staff.

It is also important for search committee members to focus on the fact that these hierarchies constitute two of the three basic elements of which every association is composed; the membership, the staff (and other resources) and, third, the CSE.

Clearly the most important of these elements is the membership. It is the membership that founded the organization, it is the membership for which the organization operates and it is the membership which will be the ultimate judge of its utility and success. The next element is the resources that the membership has made available to the association expressed in the staff, publications, financial strength and the association's reputation as built over time. The third element is the CSE -- the person/function that links the first two elements.

The CSE is the motor/transmission between what the membership wants from an association and the resources that the membership has provided for the achievement of its goals and objectives. Strong management skills (financial, operational, people) are essential to succeed in this capacity, as would be the case in overseeing the operation of any enterprise. The difference in managing an association, however, is that the CSE is not reporting to a board of directors of a publicly held corporation. The CSE of an association is reporting to the leadership of a group of individuals who see their professional, commercial or personal interests as directly affected by the management and success of the organization.

Traditionally, hierarchical organizations are depicted graphically as triangles. In the corporate model, the CEO sits at the pinnacle with direct-reports arrayed at the next level and the remainder of staff in various layers beneath - all working to achieve the goals and objectives which are seen primarily as those of the CEO, under the direction of the Board of Directors. This model does not apply to the association sector because it does not encompass the most important of an association's three basic elements - the membership.

The membership of an association is usually structured in a traditional hierarchical manner - a chief elected officer, a board of directors and the general membership, with allowance for committees and task forces as needed. The staff of the association is also structured hierarchically -- the

CSE at the top with the direct reports (e.g., vice presidents/directors) next and the balance of the staff beneath. Understanding the relationship between these two structures -- the two organizational triangles representing the membership and the staff, respectively -- is key to understanding the qualities and skills an executive will need to serve as an association CSE.

In the association model, these organizational triangles are joined at their respective pinnacles, with the association triangle (the CSE, staff and other resources) at the bottom and the membership triangle (chief elected officer, the board and the membership) on the top and inverted.

What falls most fundamentally to the CSE is the task of facilitating the membership's effort to identify its goals and objectives and to assist the leadership in coming to a consensus on policies and programs to achieve these objectives. Following this, the CSE is responsible for program implementation. The CSE must, then, be both facilitator and manager. In effect, the CSE "listens up and manages down." It is a balancing act that not every executive is comfortable with or can succeed at.

It should always be remembered that the chief elected officer position also has a heavy responsibility in consensus development and can play a key role - if not the key role in this activity. There can be no certainty, however, that the person elected each year to fill this position will bring this quality and skill to their term in office. This makes it all the more imperative that the person who serves in the more permanent position - that of the CSE - be an executive capable of facilitating a continuing consensus within the association's leadership.

Flexibility is essential for an association CSE and we look for it in any candidate we present to a search committee. Working with a new chief elected official every year makes this mandatory. Thus, while strong leadership qualities are essential to manage staff and promote consensus within the association's leadership, the executive's ego must be of the sort that can find fulfillment and satisfaction in the organization's success rather than in personal recognition. And this flexibility cannot be a fleeting phenomenon; it must remain over time.

None of the above, of course, should be seen as in any way lessening the importance of focusing on strong management skills in the search for an association CSE. It is to emphasize, however, that in addition to these skills, an association CSE must also be able to facilitate the forging of a continuing consensus within the leadership regarding the organization's goals and objectives, as well as have the management and leadership skills to ensure their achievement.