

MAKING IT TO NUMBER ONE

To the vaudeville team tap dancing their hearts out in St. Joe, the ultimate goal was playing The Palace in New York. For most association executives, this dream translates into being a chief staff executive (CSE), a Number One. While many an association executive has had a fulfilling and successful career without ever getting to this position, the goal remains for many, especially those who have enjoyed success and promotion in their association careers through their late thirties and early forties.

But wanting and getting can be two very different things. Let's take a quick look at the numbers. In the Greater Washington area, there are 70,000+ people working for associations and 1100 or so associations with budgets of \$500,000 or more. If you take out the one-in-four or so CSE jobs that go to non-association executives, the simple odds of an association professional making it to the top are approximately one in a hundred. While these odds may seem long, they can be shortened and the following are offered as points to ponder as you chart a course to the top.

ATTITUDE

The ultimate arbiter of whether you are going to land any CSE position is the association's search committee, so let's start there. Search committee members are chosen from among the association's leadership, generally on the basis of representing different aspects of the membership; east coast/west coast; old/young; thin widget producers/stout widget producers; producers/suppliers; service-oriented/issues-oriented, and so on. The idea is to capture the corporate profile and culture of the association.

While the representation element of this may seem both important and obvious, the key word for prospective CSE candidates is actually "leadership." Let's focus closely on what this means. The leadership of an association is composed of those members most committed to its goals and objectives. They are volunteers, successful in their industry or profession, distinguished from others by their interest in the world beyond the gates of their factory or the day-to-day concerns of their professional practice. They see their business or professional lives as affected by the outside world and are committed to affecting that world in a manner that is beneficial to their industry or profession. In forming a search committee, only the most respected and trusted among the leadership are asked to serve.

Search committee members, then, are people whose scope of interest includes the direction in which their industry or profession is headed. They often, in fact, see themselves as being in service to the industry or profession and it is this attitude that they bring to their consideration of CSE candidates. Creativity, entrepreneurship and ambition in CSE candidates are welcomed and encouraged, but only in so far as they will promote the association's goals and well being. As they see themselves in service to their industry or profession they seek CSE candidates who can be similarly committed and are motivated by service to a larger goal. For them, an association executive with his or her own agenda is reading off the wrong page.

MANAGEMENT

Though search committees respond favorably to candidates who bring a perspective of service to the table, this is by no means sufficient. An ability to manage is essential. For this, there is simply no substitute. Management skills are necessary to win credibility with the staff as a leader and with the Board as an executive. A CSE who cannot manage will either bring the association to ruin or gradually lose authority to others who can manage. The greatest speech on widgetdom in the history of the world is of little value if there are no chairs in the room for the audience to sit on, or if the microphone was turned off because the bills were not paid, or if the communications department was not given adequate notice to ensure media coverage.

LEADERSHIP

An ability to manage, however, is still not enough. To succeed as an association CSE, an executive must be able to lead. A leader brings a sense of purpose to an organization. Cliches abound. "Managers do things right; leaders do the right thing." But today's cliché is yesterday's wisdom, and so with this. Leaders do set direction whereas managers look to others for direction. Where the leader motivates others to achieve a shared goal by example or force of personality, the manager assigns duties and monitors progress in their achievement. Where the leader assumes authority to achieve a goal, a manager is allotted authority and accepts instruction in its application and use. Managers keep an organization functioning; leaders focus on why the organization exists and where it is going.

A leader is a person who is comfortable with change, who understands that the status quo is an oxymoron, that there is simply no such thing. Every minute, every day, there is change. Things are in constant motion. While others may not be aware of this, leaders assume it. In knowing that change is inevitable, the leader seeks change for a purpose, for the

better. Search committees respond to people who want to lead, who see a CSE position as an opportunity for accomplishment, to do something with the organization in the interest of its membership. And leadership is not for everyone. It is far more than a nice way to close a career; it has to be something that you have been doing and building on all along.

FIT

Attitude, management, leadership -- these are the tickets that get you into the chase. But there is one more hurdle and it is the toughest, the most arbitrary. It is "fit". There are several elements to fit and the first is the most obvious: Do they like you? Do you strike them as someone with whom they want to spend the time they are taking away from their work and family to attend to the association's business? Also, you are asking them to trust you with the welfare and future of their association and it should not be surprising that they are going to want to like to the person to whom they entrust it.

Another part of fit is the type organization and membership with which you are effective and comfortable. The more successful you are in one type of association may mean you are less likely to be successful in another type of association. For example, success with an issues-driven trade association whose Board looks to the CSE to drive the agenda and serve as spokesperson does not automatically translate into success as the CSE of a professional association with a highly participative Board that believes only a member can and should serve as the association's spokesperson. Each group requires an executive with a different professional makeup.

Numerous are the executives who took a position for the honor and prestige of serving as a CSE but for which they were not well suited. Lucifer's preference to rule in hell rather than to serve in heaven is an all too familiar refrain among incautious executives who accepted a position because it was a chance to be a CSE, rather than because it fit their skill set and personality. There is one notable difference, however, between the world of associations and that of Milton's Paradise Lost. Taking the wrong job as an association CSE will not be for eternity; it will only seem that way. The ordeal is generally over in a year or so with the CSE leaving among much angst and regret -- and finger pointing from all sides.

Thousands of professionals have had rewarding and fulfilling careers in association management without ever having been a CSE, a Number One. Those seeking to serve at this level do well to keep foremost in mind that it is a career goal built on competence in management, achievement in leadership and, always, taking satisfaction from group success and service to others.

