

# PEER LEADERSHIP IN AN ASSOCIATION

It is an issue in virtually every chief staff executive (CSE) search JDG conducts and one with which every search committee must come to grips at one point or another. Should the new CSE be from the industry or profession that the association represents, i.e., is a peer, or should the committee look to those who have chosen a career in association management or some other field?

The only simple thing that can be said about the peer leadership question is that there is no simple answer. The variables are numerous and complex. The following thoughts on this issue are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to provide a framework for discussion.

Issue- vs. Services-Driven Associations. Search committees from issues-driven associations tend to be more inclined to consider the benefits of peer leadership.

The thinking generally runs that credibility is crucial to representing the association effectively and who better to speak for an industry or profession than someone from it? The other side of this argument is that the association professional, experienced in issues management (i.e., lobbying), will better understand the workings of government and the interplay of organizations that affect policy development and will be better able to position the association to promote its members' interests. When credibility is the issue, the association professional will prepare the way for those from the association's leadership best able to represent the members' interests on the particular issue at hand.

Search committees of service-driven organizations often focus on management skills. Members of such organizations generally look to their association to provide training, credentialing, insurance and other services. Skills in providing these services can be developed in one association and easily transferred in another. Key to success in service-driven associations is determining and understanding what services the members need and having the ability to deliver them in a reliable, efficient and timely manner. Success in a peer's industry or profession may not necessarily translate to success in association management.

Quality and Size of Staff. A weak or inexperienced staff would generally indicate the need for a CSE with proven management experience. Association management skills are generally transferable and a strong, experienced executive with success in this area can have a dramatic and immediate impact on a staff operating at sub-optimum levels. For a group with a larger staff and one that is well regarded by the membership, peer leadership can be more attractive. This is especially so if the staff is sufficiently large to warrant a designated number two position that can be filled by a professional with strong management experience and skills.

Financial Condition. A financially strong organization with popular in-place programs and services may not require the association management experience that a troubled one would. For the troubled association, however, the skills (marketing, membership development, non-dues income programs, etc.) that the experienced professional would bring on board can be the difference between success and failure. The issue with a financially troubled group is not likely to be peer vs. non-peer leadership, but survival. For these associations, strong management is essential and the best predictor of future success is previous achievement.

Homogeneity of Membership. It is not uncommon for the members of trade or professional group to have significantly different views on an issue. Among professional societies, there can be several different schools of thought on the same issue area. Bringing a peer into such an organization runs the risk of the new CSE being seen as favoring one of these schools over the others. Trade associations can oftentimes represent several different segments of an industry (e.g., manufacturers and distributors) and drawing on one or the other of these can also prove fractious. Key to success and effectiveness of any association is the ability to come to consensus on issues and programs needed to promote the common interests of the membership. The first goal of any CSE search is hiring a CSE who can insure that consensus is achieved and maintained.

Demotion. One of the more subtle issues in hiring a peer as a CSE is that on being hired - the peer is not promoted, but demoted. The reason is that a CSE is in service to the membership; i.e., the peer CSE becomes the employee of those in the peer group. Many peers have no difficulty with this transition. Others do, however, and this can result in an incumbency that is disappointing to both the new CSE and the membership, and one that is shorter than either had contemplated.

A final note. There can be a tendency for a search committee to be biased against peer or non-peer candidates when a vacancy results from an involuntary departure of one or the other. This bias can have a crippling effect on an otherwise thorough search and should be avoided.

In summary, there are few hard and fast rules on peer vs. non-peer leadership. We recommend that the issue be addressed early in the search process and with the assistance of a professional with a strong background in association management, as well as experience in board/staff relations.