

The Dynamic Duo for Human Resources Management

Batman and Robin
Stanley and Livingston
Abbott and Costello
Lincoln and Grant
Holmes and Watson
Simon and Garfunkel
Anthony and Cleopatra
Laurel and Hardy

These and many other dynamic duos have graced the pages of history books, entertainment, and pop culture for generations. In spite of their many differences, they all had one thing in common. Each individual within the duo had unique strengths and attributes that complemented what the other one brought to the table. As individuals they each had their share of successes, but it was only by teaming together that they arguably achieved their most noteworthy accomplishments and a degree of lasting fame.

Such dynamic duos are needed in the world of human resources (HR) management – especially in organizations where staff are a critical asset. Certainly that is the case with associations. As important as members are to the success of an association, it is staff that typically does most of the day-to-day heavy lifting. The presence or lack of a talented, engaged, and highly motivated staff contingent can make or break an association in its quest to grow and successfully serve the members.

And who is this dynamic duo? It *should* be the CEO and the HR function head (for purposes of this article labeled the HR Director). Each individual brings valuable but frequently very different attributes and perspectives to their leadership roles. These different attributes when teamed up however is what creates the “dynamic” that serves the organization and staff best.

It is easy for these two individuals to operate as passing ships in the night - vaguely aware of each other, and with minimal interactions. The CEO, faced with a slew of competing priorities, may delegate most or all human resources management to the HR Director. The HR Director may readily accept this delegation and subsequently treat HR management as an administrative or operational position, and neglect their strategic role within the organization.

This situation should be avoided! A hands off approach by a CEO represents an abdication of leadership and participation in key aspects that define the organization’s culture and values that support the overall mission. It also places excessive (too much) responsibility on HR to cultivate and nurture a critical association component.

The HR function certainly bears the primary responsibility for developing and implementing HR programming, but the CEO should make sure that her/his “footprint” is evident in several ways to assure:

- The CEO’s vision for the organization and her/his preferred operating environment are supported and reinforced by HR programming.
- Staff fully realize how important they are to the CEO and the organization.

By effectively teaming with each other, the CEO’s and HR Director’s differing but complementary perspectives can help grow a workforce that gives an association the best possible return on its staff investment. CEO engagement in Human Resources matters also sends an important message to other senior staff that leadership

values staff, and that fostering a productive work environment is a priority. In the process, it typically results in the type of “employer of choice” stature that attracts and retains the best and brightest talent to your organization.

Setting the Stage for HR Leadership

Baseball legend Yogi Berra said it well. “If you don’t know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else.”

In the case of HR management, the CEO and HR Director should put their heads together to identify the type of workforce and operating environment that will best serve the organization, as well as the CEO’s preferred leadership style. Some associations have found it helpful to craft an Operating Guidelines document that codifies the CEO’s expectations along these lines (see Exhibit 1). This can be converted to a poster that hangs in the break room. It can also be disseminated to final candidates for vacant positions – letting them know before they say yes to a job offer how they will be expected to operate and interact with colleagues. Consideration should also be given to having senior staff “sign off” that they will support the guidelines and work with other members of management to incorporate them into their coaching and supervisory approach with staff.

Regardless of the process used, the key point here is that the CEO needs to articulate her/his vision for HR management and the *ideal* operating environment to the HR Director and other senior staff. The HR Director should then be charged with helping to bring this vision to reality through the design and administration of relevant HR programs, and employee relations.

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EXHIBIT 1 – Operating Guidelines Example

We will collectively strive for an operating environment that is characterized by:

- A strong mindset of member and customer service, which permeates throughout all organization levels and to all positions.
- Creativity, flexibility, adaptability, and a willingness to embrace change. Staff at all levels should be encouraged to challenge the status quo.
- A corresponding willingness to accept and learn from mistakes, as opposed to finger-pointing -- especially mistakes made in an effort to try something new.
- Respect for the abilities and potential each individual has to improve the way ASSOCIATION A operates. Opinions and contributions from all staff will be welcome, without consideration of job title or organizational level. This includes all positions from Administrative Assistant to the CEO.
- Teamwork as opposed to departmental silos in accomplishing the work of ASSOCIATION A.
- Transparency and open communications -- minimizing secrets and the use of knowledge as power.
- A willingness to bring “elephants” to the table, and a corresponding willingness to engage in critical/crucial conversations.
- A mindset of always working towards compromise, win-win solutions in interactions with work colleagues and other ASSOCIATION A stakeholders.
- A positive, collegial mindset relative to how we view our work colleagues and their intentions, with a corresponding willingness to extend trust and demonstrate worthiness of trust.

- Unity in the way we interact with those outside of the ASSOCIATION A staff organization, and the way that we support decisions made by our staff colleagues.
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Recruiting and Selection

With the vision for HR management articulated, the work begins in building a staff team that supports that vision. It all starts with recruitment and selection. The CEO and HR Director should address several strategic questions in this regard that will collectively dictate characteristics of the association's workforce, and drive certain aspects of organizational culture.

For example, should job specifications focus more on education degrees and certifications, or proven work experience in the trenches? At one extreme, there are associations that require college degrees for virtually all positions, limiting consideration of candidates that may be recognized in the marketplace as high performers but lack academic credentials. At the other extreme are associations that require two or more years of experience for even entry level positions – effectively shutting out recent college graduates and other Millennials.

CEOs should also weigh in on the extent to which they value diversity and the priority it should receive in the recruiting process. This may influence recruitment strategies designed to target job boards and other resources frequented by various demographic groups. Ultimately, the HR Director's role is to ensure that job requirements do not exclude qualified candidates and inadvertently limit diversity, or create any potentially unfair employment practices.

Additional strategic decisions that the CEO should strategize with the HR Director include:

- The relative importance of job candidates' experience in the association world as opposed to functional experience regardless of industry.
- The degree of flexibility that will be offered to job candidates relative to non-traditional work schedules or telecommuting.
- How inclusive the job candidate vetting process will be. For example, will peers and subordinates have an opportunity to interview candidates for a position, and to what extent will their input be considered?
- The types of questions that will be asked of job candidates and criteria that will be used to select the *right* one.

Finally, CEOs need to determine the role they will play in the selection process, which may differ depending upon the position. Some CEOs choose to be involved in *all* hiring decisions. Patricia Blake, CEO of the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy, reinforces the priority she places on cultural fit by personally interviewing final candidates for all vacant positions – affectionately known as the “Pat-Down”. In doing so, she develops a comfort level that all new hires are aligned with her values and priorities for the operating environment.

Employee Development

Employee development is often given short shrift in the budgeting process and is administered haphazardly – depending upon the priority individual department heads place on it for their staff. There is only so much that an HR Director can do, without strong CEO support and engagement, to drive a culture of employee development within the organization.

The CEO can serve as a role model for employee development by personally attending programs offered by the Association Forum and other entities. He/she can also drive accountability for employee development with department heads. This may include a performance metric that X% of a department's staff participate in at least one continuing education program annually. With the CEO's active support and engagement, the HR Director can focus on the nuts and bolts of administering an effective employee development program.

Staff Engagement

Employer of choice organizations, as recognized by such entities as the Chicago Tribune's "Top Work Places" and the National Association for Business Resources' "Chicago's 101 Best & Brightest Companies to Work For" typically have highly engaged and motivated workforces. HR can play a pivotal role in building and sustaining such a culture. However, the CEO needs to be a strong advocate and supporter of the HR Director. This includes budgeting for periodic employee engagement surveys that empower staff to contribute their ideas for improving association operations, or identify issues impacting their ability to engage and perform their best work. CEO approved funding for employee reward and recognition programs can also go far in supporting staff initiative and top performance.

Perhaps even more importantly, the CEO needs to demonstrate through actions her/his interest in eliciting contributions from every staff person. In some associations, the CEO serves as the facilitator of focus groups to follow up on issues and concerns raised in employee engagement surveys. Additional opportunities for CEO involvement include:

- Facilitating individual meetings with each new staff person after they have been on the job 60 to 90 days – encouraging them to convey improvement suggestions based on what they experienced working for previous employers.
- Facilitating annual meetings with each remaining staff person, or small groups of staff in larger associations, to elicit their opinions of various strategic and operating issues.
- Hosting small group casual luncheons to build comradery and foster a safe environment to bring up issues and concerns.
- Personally thanking staff who submit resourceful and innovative ideas through a Suggestion Box program.

When staff experience first-hand their CEO's interest in them and what they have to contribute outside the day to day duties shown on their job description, they are likely to feel empowered and motivated to give their all to the organization.

Performance and Compensation Management

This is an area where CEO/HR Director collaboration is especially critical. How staff are assessed and compensated can make a huge difference in how they focus their time and energy, how they interact with members and colleagues, and how they contribute to the association's overall success.

HR staff have expertise in leading the processes and overall methodologies that will apply to performance assessment, base salary and incentive compensation administration, and reward/recognition programs. However, HR needs the CEO's input and overall strategic direction in several regards, including:

- Specific performance competencies that should be assessed, keeping in mind the CEO's vision for an ideal operating environment.
- Which staff, if any, will be held accountable for establishing specific performance metrics and objectives.
- Definition of the competitive market in assessing the appropriateness of staff compensation and benefit levels. This includes factors such as industry type, geographic location, organization size, and operating budget.
- The association's strategy and overall philosophy for targeting compensation and benefit levels – below, at, or above the competitive market.
- The relative importance of key positions, and an individual's tenure and performance in making compensation adjustments.
- The degree of risk that will be associated with compensation, which will influence eligibility for incentive compensation targeted award opportunities.
- The extent to which supervisors will be given latitude to make compensation-related decisions for their subordinates.

With the CEO's direction on such issues, HR Directors will be well-positioned to design and administer specific methodology that supports what the CEO wants to accomplish in serving the association's members. This approach also ensures that the HR Director and the organization as a whole is administering compensation and employment practices consistently, and in a fair and legally non-discriminatory manner.

Continuous Improvement in HR Management

Finally, the CEO and HR Director should both place a priority on building HR staff expertise and capability to develop and administer best practice HR programming. CEOs should encourage their HR Directors to be actively engaged with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and other organizations that provide educational and networking resources to HR professionals.

Once the CEO, HR Director, and senior staff are confident that programming has been fully reviewed and supports the targeted values and culture of the organization, CEOs should also encourage participation in one or more Employer of Choice recognition program. Doing so gives any organization an opportunity to see how it stacks up against its industry and organizational peers – leading to ongoing performance improvement. It can also lead to the establishment of benchmarking relationships with other HR professionals in organizations that win recognition by these programs.



Successful Human Resources Management depends on an open and collaborative relationship between CEO and HR Director. However, a "Dynamic Duo" is forged when there is a level of trust allowing for honest and productive interaction between the two roles that involves both supporting one another's function in the organization, and challenging each other's perspective occasionally as situations arise. Always though, with the intent of advancing the association and creating a premier value proposition for the organization's most valuable assets- it's staff and human resources.