

## **“Converting challenges into opportunities leads to success.”**

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When a new executive or senior manager first comes into a association-management environment, he or she often wonders—“What should I do first?” Obviously, the answer is scenario dependent. However, there are three easy-to-remember management concepts that will normally work regardless of the scenario. These concepts focus on getting the right perspective up front, asking the right questions, and succeeding.

Everyone understands the importance of first impressions. This is doubly true of new association executives and managers. When you join a new organization, you normally have an opportunity in the first year to effect important changes. The questions you ask and how you tackle issues at the outset sets the tone for your respectability and recognition for at least your first year on the job. To ensure your impact is long lasting and recognized, you should use a clear-cut management approach designed to gain the best perspective on the organization. Review the association’s strategy, structure, and culture by asking the right questions right away. What are the right questions and what is the right approach?

1. Get the Strategy Right. Has the association gone through a strategic planning session with the association’s key players within the last three years? If so, what is the new or revised mission of the association, what will be your role in that mission, and what are the mission-linked objectives that you are responsible for directly? If the association hasn’t had a strategic planning session, then it is time to organize an off-site event that includes the association’s top leadership and key professional staff. Planning should ensure the mission(s) and objectives are achievable, measurable, and simply stated. Avoid bureaucratic “psycho babble” written so that no one knows what was meant. Find one or more objectives you can work on personally and get to it. Get the “big picture” strategic perspective of the association, work toward the mission(s) by achieving objectives on time and reporting your success stories in the newsletter early on. Check yourself frequently to see if you have “got the strategy right”.
2. Get the Structure Right. Is the association organized around the mission? Is everyone on staff working toward achieving the objectives, and if so, exactly how are they doing it? Are all of the objectives tied to individual staff members by name or not? Is the staff a group of top notch professionals, the best qualified available in the community or not? Is the salary and benefits structure up to association-community standards or are they too far below the average? Do you have the right people in the right jobs and is everyone highly qualified for their job? Are job titles focused on the mission and does everyone have a current job description? Often job titles like Director of Operations and Director of Research do not focus on the mission but on the infrastructure. The infrastructure is mission critical, but the question is balance and overall direction of the

staff. Can you see the need to replace some people, add or delete positions, revise the organizational structure, and/or change staff responsibilities?

3. Get the Culture Right. The membership and the association as a whole will have a distinct culture. For example, there are notable differences between the culture of non-profit trade associations, professional or educational associations, and charities. There is little you can or should do to affect the association's membership culture. It is probably the culture that is at the heart of the association and its mission, its *raison d'être*. Work to understand that culture and find out how you can use it to enhance the value of the association to the membership. Alternatively, there is a great deal that can be done to impact the culture of the staff. Is the staff working as a professional team or is discord and conflict evident. Office politics may be infringing on the mission. Do you hear open laughter in the office, do people feel free to have fun, and do they seem to have a culture of success and high expectations? Can you observe staff routinely working late or "going that extra mile" because they have a sense of professionalism and pride? Is the office open only 7½ hours a day and are there clock watchers? Does the membership recognize staff professionalism? Again, image is the issue. What is the culture of the work environment and who has been setting the tone in the office? Are there certain taboo or off-limits topics—"we tried that and it doesn't work around here"? Do you often hear "we've always done it that way". These are signs that there may be problems within the culture. Essentially, you need to learn the look-and-feel of the staff, the overall office image, and identify the work ethic; is it professional with a sense of urgency or has a degree of laxity taken over? Is the staff culture in need of refreshment or major surgery? If so, fix it.

Your challenge at the outset of a new job is to convert problems into opportunities, then into success stories. Follow these basic concepts and you will enhance your odds for success. Converting challenges into opportunities will lead to success. Even if you have held the top job for a few years, it would not hurt to take a totally new look at the strategy, the structure, and the culture of your association and see what you find. It might surprise you.