

Leadership in a Volunteer Organization



By James L. "Jay" Williams Jr., P.E., CEFP



When asked to write an article for *Facilities Manager* magazine, several topics made it onto my notepad. The one that I want to present to you deals with leadership in a volunteer organization. As we move through our professional lives, we have the opportunity to be involved in organizations in our community, in our state, and in our profession. The success of these groups rests on the shoulders of staff and volunteers—and having the ability to energize and motivate these people for the good of an organization and move them toward a common set of goals can sustain it for years to come.

When I stepped into the role of SRAPPA president in 2013, I presented my vision and goals for the upcoming year to the conference attendees. I share some of my notes from that night with you here:

- **Emphasize Communication:** The need for effective communication within your organization should be at the top of your list. Geographical separation can be a challenge, but with consistent communication you can bridge the gap. Monthly

teleconference calls with your board, president's messages, and best wishes for a safe and happy holiday will help build synergy and establish a cohesive organization.

- **Promote Education:** With shrinking budgets, it is difficult for organizations to train and educate their most valuable asset—the people. Look at ways to financially support the educational needs of your organization. Take advantage of scholarships, conferences, and workshops that will allow your staff to acquire valuable information to bring back to your institutions and help them to make connections with others to benchmark ideas. In today's environment, when salary adjustments are not realized, training and education are the next best alternatives.
- **Become Part of the Team:** Lead by example. Create an atmosphere that people will want to be a part of, and step up and serve in a leadership role. It is so important to show the benefits of being associated with your organization. When the word gets out, watch out, your organization will be moving in the right direction.
- **Recognize Great Work:** The opportunity to do so is there for the taking. If you don't take it, you have missed out. Identify and take the time to recognize members of your team for the exceptional work they do in their respective professions. Sometimes, this may involve a one-on-one conversation, reaching out during an office call, or recognizing someone at a conference. Do not let the chance get away from you. There is nothing more rewarding than watching a member of your team walk up on stage to receive the recognition he or she has earned through their hard work and dedication.
- **Recruit the "Best of the Best" to Serve:** Remember, there is always someone out there who is chomping at the bit to serve! You just have to go

out and find them. Once you have, establish clear lines of responsibility and give them the authority to make things happen. It is important to listen and offer support to help them avoid volunteer burnout. On the flip side, there are challenges that can present themselves when those who have volunteered don't carry out their assigned duties and responsibilities. When faced with this situation, keep in mind compassion for the individual and the fact that no one wants to be labeled a quitter. A simple conversation could reveal family- or job-related struggles as the root cause, and showing understanding will allow the individual to either refocus on his or her responsibilities to the organization or step down with dignity.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I had the fortunate opportunity to speak with Jim Melton, a nationally renowned speaker and commercial pilot who spoke at APPA 2016, and also with Peter Strazdas, Immediate Past President of APPA International. In our conversations, they shared similar ideas

about leadership, but in slightly different packaging.

Melton gave me three basic principles of leadership: 1) If things sit too long, they get off the rails; 2) we don't often get what we expect, we get what we inspect; and 3) a goal has to be set in motion, but once in motion, it has to be tweaked. Think about it.

Peter Strazdas talked to me about "touchpoints," a concept that really hits home. In order to lead and sustain a volunteer organization and keep its members engaged and motivated, you have to set a clear vision and goals, step back and assess, and adjust for the good of the organization.

And last but not least, one very important leadership principle to keep in mind is this: In the end, both you and your organization need to have fun and to enjoy what you're doing. ☺

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