



THE CHARACTERISTICS *of* TODAY'S SUCCESSFUL ASSOCIATION LEADER

by LESLIE HORTUM AND LYNN OLMAN

More than a venue for institutional executives and individual members to network and share best practices, associations today typically have highly focused advocacy and legislative agendas and aggressive programming goals. Shattering the status quo, many are expanding internationally and programmatically as they strive to enhance their value proposition to members.

As member expectations for associations have grown, so too has pressure on association CEOs. Association boards are demanding sophisticated leaders and holding chief executives to higher standards of accountability — and, in turn, giving them a stake in the association's success. Pay for performance has become more prevalent, contributing to the rapid growth in the compensation of top executives. In 2006, the 68 highest-paid executives of trade associations, professional societies, think tanks, interest groups and labor unions all earned more than \$1 million in total compensation.

When recruiting a new chief executive, associations are seeking candidates with the strategic skills and experience to lead the organization and its program offerings to new levels of excellence. While many strong career association executives are considered in every search, associations also covet former governors or legislators and other high-profile individuals with political savvy, executive presence

and a unique ability to open doors. Through our work with association search committees, we have seen a number of desired traits emerge as common CEO specifications for the nation's top associations.

AN ADVOCATE FOR THE MISSION OR PROFESSION

Association search committees want to know that a candidate is sincerely interested in running their association. Whether the organization represents an industry or professional group, candidates must be able to answer the question, "Why this association?" Ideally, candidates will demonstrate a personal connection or proven substantive investment in the work of the organization and a passion for its agenda.

POLITICAL SAVVY AND NEUTRALITY

The primary role of most trade associations today is to advocate. Search committees are looking for an executive leader who can navigate the political, legislative and regulatory waters for them. He or she needs to play well with the administration — or at least not be a lightning rod at the White House, Capitol Hill or the state house.

While it may be tempting to recruit a leader from the party in charge, over the long term, the most effective advocate is one who understands the state, regional and federal political landscape; carefully manages regulatory and legislative issues; and works effectively with both political parties. The ability to get good marks on both sides of the aisle is important. Within the association, political savvy is also critical to successfully navigate the nuances of the relationships among the volunteer leadership.

FINANCIAL LITERACY

Search committees want CEO candidates who can run the association according to business best practices. Association executives must be able to report on the association's finances in a way business leaders can relate to and understand, while bringing a level of sophistication and transparency to operations, budgeting and fundraising. Search committees often ask to see candidates who have for-profit and nonprofit experience.

CEO candidates should also be able to compellingly present the value proposition of membership, which is especially important to keep members and the association solvent in a down economy. Increasingly, candidates should have the proven ability to develop programs, products and services to grow revenue from non-dues sources such as meetings, educational programs, professional development programs, trade shows, publications and advertising sales. These vehicles can create additional value for members and fund additional programs of benefit to members without necessitating dues increases.

A SKILLED CONSENSUS BUILDER

Even though they represent specific industries and professions, associations typically have broad and diverse memberships of different regional backgrounds and interests, and volunteer board members who bring a variety of perspectives on the primary issues facing members. The CEO needs to find common ground (and not just the least common denominator) among disparate viewpoints and even direct competitors to ensure that individual agendas are left at the door and consensus is built on key industry issues.

When times are tough, the chief executive must also be a convener who can bring the constituencies together when no one else can to address important issues head-on. To succeed in doing this, the association leader needs to be highly respected — a person who makes industry leaders say, “He’s on the phone; it must be important. I’d better take that call.”

AN EXECUTIVE PRESENCE AND ARTICULATE SPOKESPERSON

With so much emphasis on their advocacy agenda, associations require leaders who look and act the part. They want an influencer who is or can quickly become substantively credible on the industry's issues; articulate a clear vision for the association and the value it provides its members; and serve as a superb spokesperson for its interests with legislators, the press, regulators and other key audiences.

Internally, the CEO needs strong executive skills to attract talent, manage a diverse and driven staff, and keep employees engaged in an environment where there may be few opportunities for promotion.

At the same time, the chief executive must fully embrace the role of servant leader. He or she must never forget that he is there to serve the board, but must also present the pros and cons of any particular strategic direction in a candid, yet persuasive way that guides the board down the correct path.

A TRACK RECORD OF SUCCESS

Every association sees itself as uniquely complex and, in many ways, each is. Search committees look for leaders who have “been there, done that” and done it well. Committee members want to see real-world examples of how candidates have built consensus, led their board in a strategic planning process, influenced the media and legislators, and managed a business or organization of comparable size and scope. They want to see candidates relate their experience to the concerns, demands and opportunities of their organization.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Since most associations view the status quo as inadequate for the future, they are also looking for a leader with the strategic vision to take the organization to its next level of excellence.

To provide this vision, chief executives may need international experience or at least a global perspective to support constituents who are competing on a global scale or introducing themselves to a global marketplace. Increasingly, they need IT savvy to harness the power of emerging media to enhance grassroots and grass-tops advocacy, promote products and services, and connect with the next generation of membership. And they should be able to build diverse organizations that offer a broad range of perspectives to accurately reflect — and effectively advocate for — changing constituencies of increasing ethnic and geographic diversity.

As the demands on association executives have grown, association search committees are seeking sophisticated leaders who meet a newly expanded set of criteria. In response, Spencer Stuart is committed to presenting the broadest spectrum of strong, qualified candidates, and to identifying creative solutions to our clients' leadership needs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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