



## “Because I Said So” Won’t Cut It

By David M. Patt, CAE

“Our association’s CEO had been a hard-line manager who gave explicit orders, expected them to be carried out to the letter, and watched like a hawk to pounce when she saw any deviation,” recalls Linda Ridge, president of OnPoint Solutions, Inc., about an event early in her career.

Her successor, she notes, had a more employee-centered style. Once the new management style took hold, one staffer said to the new CEO, “I just wanted to thank you. You changed my life.”

Small-staff CEOs are responsible for the success of their associations and are judged on measurable outcomes: more members, more revenue, more registration fees, more exhibitors, and so forth. We manage the staff (when we have one) the way we (CEOs) think will best achieve success.

What we don’t always consider is how our management styles influence the effectiveness of staff and, ultimately, the success of our associations. Employees are people, not computer programs, pipe and drape, or office supplies. They have feelings, and those feelings affect their work.

“The staff member has more and better information than you do [as CEO],” adds Lou Ellen Horwitz, MA, executive director of the Urgent Care Association of America. “They are closer to the problem.”

In a well-functioning association, employees should be more knowledgeable than the CEO about their areas of responsibility. The job of the CEO is to piece it all together to achieve association success, not hover over employees, telling them what to do.

Workers in bad situations often display low morale, no loyalty, and little creativity. Since they are treated more like inmates than producers of work, they generate little value to their employers, through no fault of their own, and merely

go through the motions of following orders.

“My management philosophy is to treat others as I like to be treated,” says David Parr, CEO of the American Brush Manufacturers Association. Evidently, not all executives share that belief.

Some executives claim they have to be controlling to get things done, but they really don’t have to be. Here are some management myths that need to be debunked:

**The employee is not accountable to the board, the executive is.** But the executive cannot meet board expectations unless the staff is successful at their work. The executive should create a climate that invites success.

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**The employee doesn’t know everything that is involved in the issue.** Then tell the employee what’s involved. Don’t keep information to yourself.

**The employee won’t do it the way the supervisor would have done it.** So what? The employee should know how to do it better. The result, not the process of achieving the result, is most important.

**The employee is too willing to make exceptions to association policy.** The policy may be the problem. Revisit the policy, determine why the employee thinks exceptions should be made, and consider changing it.

**The employee really wants to be more controlled.** The “more” the employee wants is guidance, not control.

Some employees need a better understanding of what their supervisors expect—

and not to have it change frequently. Many want administrative or political support. Others merely want regular communication, so they aren’t caught unaware of changes. They want to know their work and advice are valued by decision makers.

“Different styles are needed at different times,” says Susan Oster, CAE, executive director of the International Psychogeriatric Association. Managers need to be flexible and be able to provide more guidance and support to some employees, some of the time.

A staffer once told Julie Kahlfeldt, executive director of the American Association of Orthopaedic Executives and a self-proclaimed hands-off manager, that she felt like she was left hanging without a safety

net. She wanted more support (not control) and expected management to share responsibility for the outcomes of her work.

Unfortunately, many executives don’t know how to manage, can’t adjust styles when needed, or are disorganized and arbitrary. They forget, or don’t realize, how important it is to treat people like, well, people.

“I like the relaxed, human style,” says Maureen Schick, executive director of the American College of Psychiatrists. “I think most people [employees] prefer it.”

And it gets better results.

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