



Starting Strong

Your first days on the job as a chamber exec

The moves that you make during your first 100 days as an exec at a new chamber can make a significant difference, both in your successful service to your new organization and in how efficient an operation you oversee. There are a series of universal steps that you should take in your infancy in a new position, even as a well-trained, seasoned exec. Take heed and give them due note. If you follow these basic steps, your first few months can lay the foundation for an active, successful, aggressive chamber of commerce.

First weeks

When you are new to a job or to a community, you need to get a good grounding on what is expected of you and of the environment in which you will respond to the challenges that you discover. “Getting to Know You” are not just the lyrics from *The King and I*...; the phrase also represents one of the major factors in understanding what needs to be done.

The seasoned exec in a new chamber position should get to know his/her volunteer leadership well. You should meet with the officers, ask the obvious questions about desired programming, seek out information about the ‘skeletons in the closet,’ and get to know them personally. Particularly when you are new, it’s helpful to know your leadership as soon as possible.

The exec who is new to the profession needs to get to know his/her board of directors first, the final authority to whom they report directly. You should ask them many questions about what they expect and how they expect it to be

performed. Then you should develop a “performance plan” to show them what, how, & when they can expect the results, and determine if your plan meets their needs.

Both seasoned exec, and new staff member should

get to know their associates well. It is imperative that you share yourself with those at whose side you are going to accomplish much for your community. Understand your office culture so that you can fit in with your new peers, rather than being perceived as unfriendly or obstructive. Be one of the first to arrive and one of the last to leave, setting the example for staff and volunteer alike. Your chamber should be an organization working hard on behalf of its membership. The old quote that I use in my book for volunteers makes the point. “No one of us is as good as all of us.” Learn to work with those around you, and your successes will multiply.

Making a list

One of the first things you should do, either as a new staffer or as a CEO, is to make a list. The list should contain every thought that you have about what needs to be improved or changed, and whether it is an immediate need or can be dealt with over a reasonable period of time. Your list should be your observations about changes that need to be made or actions that should be taken. If an item occurs to you, it should make your list. You always have the right, after further consideration, to delete something off the list.

Of course, you can’t possibly accomplish everything that you believe should be done at your new job. The key is doing as much as you believe should be done when it is practical to do it. Sometimes you never get it done; timing is as important as the issue itself. At one chamber I served, there were 27 issues on my list; when I left seven years later, 21 of them

had been achieved, three had been marked through, and three were yet to be done. At my next assignment at a larger chamber, I had 16 issues on the original list, and when I left six years later, 14 of those items remained. I had been engulfed by more important priorities and a struggle for personal survival.

In each of the two instances above, no one knew that I had a list, but it allowed me to chart a course and, where possible, steer to the safe harbor of program accomplishment. I added and subtracted priorities along the way and each month or so, I re-prioritized the projects as practicality allowed. Examples:

- My first day on the job in one community, I wrote: “Find a flag!” This was my way of telling me that the operation was too comfortable...no exciting projects...no major challenges...business as usual. Less than 12 months later, we selected a project that was accomplishable, met the mission of the organization by having an economic impact on the community, and excited the membership.
- Arriving at a different chamber, I quickly wrote this word on my list: “stabilize.” The chamber had been in a war with the city leadership, and had its contract to provide conventions and visitor services. I worked for more than 12 months to let the chamber be seen as solid, well-organized, and responsible. All the while, I encouraged volunteer leaders to visit with city leadership and point out how poorly they were operating the C&VB. Not only did that function return to the chamber within two years, but it did so under a contract that was much more favorable to both the chamber and the program, with the chamber board of directors overseeing the function rather than a separate board. Still today, 25 years later, that chamber operates under a contract that was developed by our volunteer leaders and me, because I wrote “stabilize” on a list.



Fitting in

If you bend over backwards early on in your relationship with new staff members, they will always expect you to be too amenable in the future. It is important to assert your leadership in the first few days. Find some things that are wrong and insist that they be corrected. As staff gets to know you better, they will be relieved at how pleasant and reasonable you have become. If you are seen as "easy to work with" at the beginning, you are destined to be an inevitable disappointment to staff members later.

Early on in your new tenure at a chamber, you should be perceived as "having assimilated" into the community. The way of life in our profession is best described as a "living in goldfish bowl." You should be seen as living inside the community you are serving, wherever possible, or, when not possible, at least as very involved in the life of the community.

Think about volunteerism: It's not just a service provided by your volunteers. It's not reasonable that you should represent an organization receiving all kinds of volunteer assistance without making a volunteer contribution at your church or your civic club or at some other volunteer organization beyond your own.

Carve out a personal life...

Far too many conscientious chamber execs believe their own press clippings. We have a great tendency to believe that we *can* do everything and that the operation cannot make it without us.

If you are in chamber management for the long haul, you must save some time for family, for friends, for hobbies, and for personal interests. Sure, we all work long hours when the job must be done, but there are other times, when we can take a little time to enjoy those things that mean so much to us. Those precious times should not be surrendered. You will be all the better for it, and so will your chamber.

...but, put in the time

That said, it is of paramount importance that you do your homework. It is absolutely true that there is little original thought left in our business. Therefore, you should learn from those who have gone before. Read, study, contact chamber pros in the region, talk to former volunteer leaders. Avoid the stupid unnecessary mistakes that could have been anticipated. Save your bloopers for the unavoidable ones.

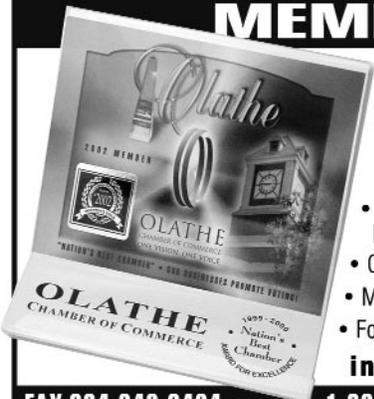
Finally, be prepared to work hard. There is no substitute for hard work.

Intelligence, quick wit, the ability to motivate are all important assets, but the greatest of these is working hard. The hours spent in making the project the best that it can be may be difficult, but each success is its own reward, as staff members and volunteers then know you to be a dedicated employee/leader.

The work of leading a group of volunteers to make something happen is a calling that few get the chance to answer.

Art Roberts is the Senior VP of the Texas Association of Business, working with more than 600 local chambers in that state. Roberts is the author of Operating the Volunteer Organization and of Recognizing Your Role as a Volunteer. In November, Roberts conducted the 282ND retreat that he has facilitated for a local chamber. Prior to his work at TAB, Roberts was CEO of four Texas Chambers that ranged from a staff of 2 to a staff of 31. He can be contacted at aroberts@tab.org

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