

Strong Staff-Volunteer Relationship

Is there such a thing as an ideal staff-volunteer relationship? Can REALTOR® association leaders and Executive Officers say, “We have reached our goal. This is the balance we want: let’s maintain it”?

I don’t think so. It is possible to find the right mix of staff and volunteer efforts at various stages in an association’s life; however, each of those points will eventually become part of the organization’s history and a new stage will evolve. Each stage is dynamic and requires a different staff-volunteer balance.

Yesterday’s Balance

Many REALTOR® associations began with little or no staff, and volunteer leaders administered many of the programs. It was important that members backed the established structure because their input and participation was critical to the development and implementation of benefits and services that would become the foundation of the association.

As an organization matures, services become more complex. Modern technology placed new demands on leadership. A greater level of expertise is required to administer member services and the scale begins tipping toward the staff-driven side.

As the association continues to mature, it may circle back to a formative period and the staff-volunteer balance may reverse. This may happen if the organization loses touch with members. Regaining the pulse and helping the organization grow will require more emphasis on volunteers.

Today’s Balance

Today, a successful staff-volunteer requires a genuine partnership between staff and volunteer leaders. Each party brings certain components to the partnership.

Paid Staff Executives	Volunteers
.. Inform and advise volunteer leaders to help them make educated decisions and policies.	.. Represent and speak for all association members, not just for yourself or your firm.
.. Carry out leadership’s decisions in an efficient and responsible manner.	.. Serve all constituencies, large and small.
.. Understand and accept the importance of the volunteer role.	.. Recognize and assume obligations and responsibilities to the organization.
.. Watch for changing needs of the association and its members and remain flexible when change occurs.	.. Show an honest effort to work cohesively with staff.

As in any partnership, the relationship between volunteer leaders and staff executives may weaken at times. One of the parties must recognize signs of weakness before it’s too late. Here are some symptoms that could indicate a deteriorating staff-volunteer relationship:

- Poor communication. The staff executive is responsible for informing leadership of current issues and concerns. Whether working with government documents or a local issue involving other

community entities, the EO must give leaders enough background information to help them address the issue. The reverse is also true: An EO cannot do his or her job without input and knowledge from association leaders.

- Turf battles. These skirmishes usually occur when one party does not clearly understand the other's responsibilities and authority. Executive Officers who make decisions beyond the authority vested in them by the association breach the trust volunteer leaders place in them, and volunteer leaders breach that same trust when they try to assume the EO's responsibilities.
- Staff not acting on leader's decisions in a timely fashion. Remember, volunteers serve the association on their time. They may have sacrificed a lot of personal time to develop a proposal. Staff should never pass judgment on a leader's idea or decision without first discussing it with the appropriate parties.
- Leaders not taking their commitment seriously. This can include missing important meetings, arriving unprepared or exhibiting behaviour that doesn't command respect from the rest of the group.

Great Expectations

The volunteer leader's and EO's expectations play an important role in the partnership. Unrealistic goals can lead to failure.

The new president who decides unilaterally to send all members personal correspondence on a weekly basis will be despaired when this doesn't occur. The president and EO should discuss goals and expectations that require such support in advance.

The EO must set realistic goals. He or she must rely on the wisdom of the leadership and always remember that the association exists to benefit members. Although the association executive runs the organization as a business, it is important to never lose sight of its purpose: To provide products and services to meet member needs. This may require organizational changes, orchestrated by the EO, from time to time. The EO must recognize the need for change and respond accordingly to the direction of the volunteer leadership.

A Balancing Act

The volunteer-staff relationship can be enhanced with training. The following suggestions are for initial and ongoing training that can help the volunteer-staff leadership team stay balanced.

- Hold an orientation for new directors. Include an overview of their new responsibilities, an explanation of staff responsibilities, and the association's decision-making process. Distribute a policy manual and governing documents that reference association operations. Staff and leaders should participate in this program so that both perspectives are shared with the new team.
- Develop a training program for committee chairmen and vice chairmen. These people have taken the first step in assuming responsibility for association activities and need the necessary tools to perform their duties. They are also prime candidates for future directors.

The training program should explain the decision-making process. Committee leaders must know how recommendations from their committees will be processed. They must know what leaders, staff, and members expect of them, as well as the support they can expect from staff and leaders.

- Schedule a planning session for elected leaders. They must review the successes and failures of the association and devote the appropriate time and thought to its future. Planning accentuates the need for a strong staff-volunteer working relationship. Staff can provide the continuity and

history, but volunteer leaders must provide the member perspective that will emerge from futuring, which occurs during this exercise.

- Evaluate the association executive's performance. The evaluation familiarizes both parties with the EO's duties and the volunteer's obligations. It's a safety mechanism that uncovers potential weaknesses that could cause further deterioration if unchecked. The evaluation can also uncover strengths that are not being used in the best interest of the parties.
- Evaluate each elected leader's performance. The association must oversee the actions of officers to ensure that the organization's interests are properly represented. This applies not only to external duties performed by the president and other officers, but also on how these leaders work internally with staff and the administrative policies of the organization as well.

Be sure that each leader has a formal job description that he or she consults throughout the year. Encourage leaders to question the actions of other leaders if association policies or the association's image are in jeopardy. Suggest that the management team perform a self-evaluation during one of its regular meetings. Have the team review external association policies and compare them with how procedures are currently followed.