

# The Dynamic Duo for Human Resources Management

**CEOs and HR leaders  
should collaborate to  
attract and retain top  
talent.**

Batman and Robin. Stanley and Livingston. Abbott and Costello. Lincoln and Grant. Holmes and Watson. Laurel and Hardy. Simon and Garfunkel. These and many other dynamic duos have been celebrated for generations in history books, entertainment and pop culture. In spite of their many differences, they all had one thing in common: Each half of these duos brought unique yet complementary strengths to their partnership. As individuals, each was successful. It was only by teaming together, however, that they arguably achieved their most noteworthy accomplishments.

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The world of human resources management could easily benefit from such partnerships—especially in associations. As important as members are to an association's success, staff typically does most of the day-to-day heavy lifting. The presence—or lack—of a talented, engaged and highly motivated staff can make or break an association in its quest to grow and successfully serve its members.

So who, exactly, should team up in pursuit of top talent? It should be the CEO and the organization's HR function leader, hereafter referred to as the HR director. Each individual brings valu-

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able but usually very different attributes and perspectives to their leadership roles. These different attributes, when teamed together, make the duo truly “dynamic” in service of the organization and its staff.

It is easy for these two individuals to operate as passing ships in the night, vaguely aware of each other and with minimal interactions. The CEO, faced with a slew of competing priorities, may delegate most or all human resources management to the HR director. Consequently, the HR director may readily accept this delegation and subsequently treat HR management as an administrative or operational position, neglecting their strategic role within the organization.

Such a situation should be avoided. A hands-off approach by a CEO represents an abdication of leadership and participation in key aspects that define an organization's culture and values in support of its overall mission. It also places excessive responsibility on HR to cultivate and nurture a critical association component. The HR function certainly bears the primary responsibility for developing and implementing HR programming, but CEOs should have their “footprint” evident in several ways to ensure that their vision for the organization is realized, that their preferred operating environment is reinforced by HR programming and that employees fully realize how important they are to the organization.

When the CEO and HR director effectively team up, their differing but complementary perspectives can help develop a workforce that gives an association the best possible return on its staff investment. CEO engagement in human resources also sends an important message to other senior staff that leadership values staff, and that fostering a productive work environment is a priority. In the process, it typically results in the type of “employer-of-choice” stature that attracts and retains the best and brightest talent.

## Setting the Stage for HR Leadership

Baseball legend Yogi Berra said it well: “If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else.” In the case of HR management, the CEO and HR director should collaboratively identify the type of workforce and operating environment that will best serve the organization, as well as the CEO's preferred leadership style. Some associations have found it helpful to craft an “operating guidelines” document that codifies the CEO's expectations (see sidebar on p. 25). This can be converted to a poster that hangs in the break room or other high-traffic employee area. It also can be disseminated to final candidates for open positions, letting them know before they accept a job offer how they will be expected to operate and interact with colleagues.

Consider also having senior staff “sign off” that they will support the guidelines and work with other members of management to incor-

porate them into their coaching and supervisory approach with their staff.

Regardless of the process used, the CEO must articulate her or his vision for HR management and the ideal operating environment to the HR director and other senior staff. The HR director should then be charged with helping to realize this vision through the design and administration of relevant HR programs and employee relations.

## Recruiting and Selection

With the vision for HR management articulated, the work begins in building a staff team that supports that vision, starting with recruitment and selection. The CEO and HR director should address several strategic questions that will collectively dictate characteristics of the association's workforce and drive certain aspects of organizational culture.

For example, should job specifications focus more on education degrees and certifications, or proven work experience? At one extreme, there are associations that require advanced degrees for virtually all positions, limiting consideration of candidates that may be recognized in the marketplace as high performers but lack academic credentials. At the other extreme are associations that require two or more years of experience for even entry-level positions—effectively eliminating recent college graduates and possibly other Millennials.

CEOs should also convey how they value diversity and the priority it should receive in the recruiting process. This may influence recruitment strategies designed to target job boards and other resources frequented by various demographic groups. Ultimately, the HR director's role is to ensure that job requirements do not exclude qualified candidates and inadvertently limit diversity or create any potentially unfair employment practices.

Additional strategic decisions that the CEO and HR director should make include:

- The relative importance of job candidates' experience in the associations as opposed to functional experience regardless of industry.

- The degree of flexibility that will be offered to job candidates relative to non-traditional work schedules or remote working.
- How inclusive the job candidate vetting process will be. For example, will peers and subordinates have an opportunity to interview candidates for a position, and to what extent will their input be considered?
- The types of questions that will be asked of job candidates and criteria that will be used to select the right one.

Finally, CEOs must determine what role they will play in the selection process, which may differ depending upon the position. Some CEOs, like American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy CEO Patricia Blake, choose to be involved in all hiring decisions. Blake reinforces the priority she places on cultural fit by personally interviewing final candidates for all vacant positions—affectionately known as the “Pat-Down.” In doing so, she develops a comfort level that all new hires are aligned with her values and priorities for the operating environment.

## Employee Development

Employee development is often given short shrift in the budgeting process and administered haphazardly depending upon the priority individual department leaders place on it for their staff. There is only so much that an HR director can do without strong CEO support and engagement to drive a culture of employee development within the organization.

The CEO can serve as a role model for employee development by personally attending continuing education programs or engaging in platforms for sharing ideas offered by industry organizations. He or she can also drive accountability for employee development with department leaders—for example, by establishing a performance metric requiring a certain percentage of a department's staff to participate in at least one continuing education program per year. With the CEO's active support and engagement, the HR director can focus on administering an effective employee development program.

## Staff Engagement

“Employer-of-choice” organizations, those recognized by such entities as the *Chicago Tribune’s* on its “Top Work Places” list and by the National Association for Business Resources on its list of “Chicago’s 101 Best & Brightest Companies to Work For,” typically have highly engaged and motivated workforces. HR can play a pivotal role in building and sustaining such a culture. However, the CEO must be a strong advocate and supporter of the HR director. This includes budgeting for periodic employee engagement surveys that empower staff to contribute their ideas for improving association operations, or for identifying issues impacting their ability to engage and perform their best work. CEO-approved funding for employee reward and recognition programs also can go far in supporting staff initiative and performance.

Perhaps even more importantly, the CEO must demonstrate through actions her or his interest in eliciting contributions from every staff person. In some associations, the CEO serves as the facilitator of focus groups to follow up on issues and concerns raised in employee engagement surveys. Additional opportunities for CEO involvement include:

- Facilitating individual meetings with each new staff person after they have been on the job 60 to 90 days, encouraging them to convey improvement suggestions based on what they experienced working for previous employers.
- Facilitating annual meetings with each staff person, or small groups of staff in larger associations, to elicit their opinions of various strategic and operating issues.
- Hosting small group casual luncheons to build camaraderie and foster a safe environment in which to bring up issues and concerns.
- Personally thanking staff members who submit resourceful and innovative ideas through a “suggestion box” program.

When staff members have a CEO who’s personally interested in them and what they can contribute beyond their duties detailed in their job descriptions, they are more likely to feel

empowered and motivated to give their all to the organization.

## Performance and Compensation Management

This is an area where CEO and HR director collaboration is especially critical. How staff are assessed and compensated can make a huge difference in how they focus their time and energy, interact with members and colleagues, and contribute to the association’s overall success.

HR staff has expertise in leading the processes and overall methodologies that will apply to performance assessment, base salary and incentive compensation administration, as well as reward and recognition programs. However, HR needs the CEO’s input and overall strategic direction in several regards, including:

- Specific performance competencies that should be assessed, keeping in mind the CEO’s vision for an ideal operating environment.
- Which staff, if any, will be held accountable for establishing specific performance metrics and objectives.
- Definition of the competitive market in assessing the appropriateness of staff compensation and benefit levels. This includes factors such as industry type, geographic location, organization size and operating budget.
- The association’s strategy and overall philosophy for targeting compensation and benefit levels—below, at or above the competitive market.
- The relative importance of key positions as well as an individual’s tenure and performance, in making compensation adjustments.
- The degree of risk that will be associated with compensation, which will influence eligibility for incentive compensation or targeted reward opportunities.
- The extent to which supervisors will be given latitude to make compensation-related decisions for their subordinates.

With the CEO’s direction on such issues, HR directors will be well positioned to design and administer specific methodology that supports what the CEO wants to accomplish in serving

## Operating Guidelines Example

Following is an example of what to include in an office manual that outlines a CEO’s expectations for the workforce and operating environment.

We will collectively strive for an operating environment that is characterized by:

- A strong mindset of member and customer service, which permeates throughout all organization levels and to all positions.
- Creativity, flexibility, adaptability and a willingness to embrace change. Staff at all levels should be encouraged to challenge the status quo.
- A corresponding willingness to accept and learn from mistakes rather than finger-pointing—especially mistakes made in an effort to try something new.
- Respect for the abilities and potential each individual has to improve the way the association operates. Opinions and contributions from all staff will be welcome, without consideration of job title or organizational level. This includes all positions from administrative assistant to CEO.
- Teamwork as opposed to departmental silos in accomplishing the work of the association.
- Transparency and open communications, minimizing secrets and the use of knowledge as power.
- A willingness to bring “elephants” to the table, and a corresponding willingness to engage in critical and crucial conversations.
- A mindset of always working toward compromise and win-win solutions in interactions with work colleagues and other association stakeholders.
- A positive, collegial mindset relative to how we view our work colleagues and their intentions, with a corresponding willingness to extend trust and demonstrate worthiness of trust.
- Unity in the way we interact with those outside of our staff organization, and the way that we support decisions made by our staff colleagues.



the association’s members. This approach also ensures that the HR director and the organization as a whole are administering compensation and employment practices consistently and in a fair and legal manner.

## Continuous Improvement in HR Management

Finally, the CEO and HR director should both prioritize building HR staff expertise and capability to develop and administer best-practice HR programming. CEOs should encourage their HR directors to be actively engaged with the Society for Human Resources Management and other organizations that provide relevant educational and networking resources.

Once the CEO, HR director and senior staff are confident that programming has been fully reviewed and supports the targeted values and culture of the organization, CEOs should also encourage participation in employer-of-choice recognition programs. Doing so enables an organization to compare itself to industry and organizational peers, leading to ongoing performance

improvement. It also can help establish relationships with other HR professionals in organizations that win recognition from these programs.

Successful HR management depends on an open and collaborative relationship between the CEO and HR director. However, a “dynamic duo” is forged when there is a level of trust allowing for honest and productive interaction between the two roles. This includes supporting one another’s function in the organization and occasionally challenging each other’s perspective as situations arise. By working together, this duo can advance the association and create a winning value proposition for the organization’s most valuable asset: its staff. ■

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