

Three Key Leadership Duties: Care, Loyalty & Obedience



"I know you've been waiting for that promotion to V. P., Roberts, but I've decided to give it to my son Timmy. You understand, don't you?"



BY JOANNE L. SMIKLE

As I sat waiting for the monthly Board Meeting to begin I was silently praying that it would not be a bored meeting. We were scheduled to have a presentation from an attorney. He was to advise us on the legal duties and

responsibilities one assumes when volunteering for a nonprofit Board of Directors. What I was dreading did not come to fruition. The attorney provided a thought-provoking hour filled with interesting information. Many of his points made me think about my association clients and how his admonishments for our Board of Directors would benefit them. As a result, the Board Meeting [that did not turn into a bored meeting] is the genesis of this article on leadership duties to the association.

THE DUTIES

There are three commonly known, widely accepted duties of Board Members. They are the **duty** of care, the **duty** of loyalty and the **duty** of obedience. Wouldn't association life be easier if every employee, be they management or staff, understood and conscientiously fulfilled these three duties? Beginning with the **duty** of care, it requires a comprehension of the financial aspects of the organization and active participation in governance. As an association executive this **duty** requires more than trustworthy financial stewardship, it also requires an eye towards long-term financial solvency. This means identifying strategic investments that add to the association's bottom line. The **duty** of care extends to salaries and compensation as well. Are you overcompensating underperformers because they have been with you a long time? Are you giving bonuses based on merit or based on arcane criteria like longevity or likeability? The **duty** of care would suggest that association executives pay attention to who gets paid, what and why.

When the **duty** of loyalty is put into an association context it become quite interesting. It requires prohibition of conflicts of interest. It also requires that transactions be transparent, ethical and in the best interest of the association. The interesting thing about this particular **duty** is that a vast majority of people claim to be ethical, moral and upstanding. It would seem that this would be unnecessary to specify. In the real world, it is quite necessary.

Consider the following examples that illustrate why this **duty** is of such importance. A sizable professional association's Executive Director decided to hire her daughter-in-law for a key management position. She also decided to restructure the position to accommodate her daughter-in-law's young children's schedule. Knowing that her son and daughter were having financial hardships, she gave her a sizable raise. Remembering that her daughter-in-law needed to be at home and did not really enjoy travel, she gave the travel assignments to another employee.

Needless to say, the Board of Directors was asleep at the wheel. It also goes without saying that rancor and unrest ensued among the staff. Who wouldn't want to get a raise, work less hours and be in a key role? This Executive Director did not intentionally shirk her **duty** of loyalty, her vision just got clouded by her heart. While this is an extreme case, it may happen in more subtle ways more often than one would like to think.

The **duty** of obedience calls on executives to ensure that they are compliant with laws, regulations and internal policies. It goes deeper than just perfunctory legal compliance. There is also a serious responsibility to ensure that the association is focused on its mission and that there are sufficient

resources dedicated to that mission. This requires that the association executive be very clear about, and committed to, the guiding purposes of the organization. This requires a focus beyond day-to-day operating concerns. Strategic planning and positioning are essential. Staff and organizational development are also key activities for a mission-driven association executive. While some executives dismiss the need for a compelling mission, not having one puts an organization at risk for being rudderless.

USING THE DUTIES TO CREATE CHANGE

Few associations are exactly as they were ten years ago or will be five years into the future. Thoughtfully using these duties will enable the entire association to both initiate and respond to transitions. Consider this, if the **duty** of care became normative at all levels of the association, managers would be attentive to staff development. They would coach consistently, counsel as required and create mentoring opportunities. The **duty** of care would also raise the bar on quality. Mediocrity and last minute deliverables would be replaced with excellence and thoughtfully crafted products. The **duty** of care requires an attention to detail. It requires cultivating a team of people who have deep mastery of their subject area and sincere commitment to member service.

Embedding the **duty** of loyalty throughout the association would directly impact commitment to the organization. It is commitment that breeds engagement and healthy retention. It extends far beyond the morality and ethics of avoiding conflicts of interests. It extends to creating an atmosphere where professional loyalty, a commitment to one's chosen livelihood, is commonplace. Professional

loyalty dictates that the employee, be they management or staff, be lifelong learners who consistently refine their skill set. This **duty** of loyalty is integral to turning the association into an employer of choice that offers developmental opportunities for everyone.

Finally, the **duty** of obedience allows the association to be forward-focused. It is a tool that should spark an interest in innovation, creativity and fresh approaches that support the mission and vision of the association. The obedience is to keeping the association viable for current and future generations of members. This implies an interest in finding ways to maximize the mission. It implies purposeful action that advances the aims of the association so that members and employees will fully commit.

These commonly accepted guides for Boards of Directors have applications beyond the board room. They can be applied to associations committed to refining their modus operandi. They are tools executives can employ to add value and create best practices throughout the association.

Joanne L. Smikle provides insightful consulting, speaking and leadership education to associations across the country. She is in the midst of completing dissertation research on employee commitment and retention. Visit www.smiklespeaks.com for articles and resources. She can be reached at joanne@smiklespeaks.com or 301.596.3140.